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WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT

Africa's Snow White,

Oh ... Canada (The 6th novel in this series)

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By: JONATHAN ELOFF (Some 2nd. Ed. scenes co-written by Nicholas Strauss)

"Only after she was forced to move to Canada, from Africa, do I get to meet the real-life Elizabeth. I hold the distinction of being the only person to visit with her in every one of her homes over almost 4 decades, in N. and S. America. Be warned – This story has many more twists and turns than you can possibly imagine, like 3 weddings on 3 continents (one of which was in Helena, MT) and not for any of the usual reasons! As in the fairy-tale, there's a surprise heart-warming ending that really does involve a King, a Prince, and a well deserved happily ever in a beautiful cottage, in a pristine jungle paradise inside of a National park, complete with picturesque clear mountain streams, and yes, you guessed right - beautiful waterfalls cascading down into natural swimming pools, as well as monkeys, colorful birds, butterflies and continuously blooming flowers - in a land far, far away. So how do I know all this? As I write, I'm visiting with Elizabeth and her family there."

Mary – Pioneering woman and lifetime resident of MT, USA.

"As a real-life counterpart to a character in these novels, I'm left sitting on the edge of my seat, and feeling all those feelings again. Feelings of elation and heartache, of love found, and lost, then found again, then almost lost forever, then rediscovered in a miraculous way, then lost to the other side of the world. But, I know how it ends, 42 years later, and where it all ends. In a way, kind of like how and where it all began. Jonathan makes the characters, and this story, come to life—again. It may be tough to endure the wild long roller-coaster ride in the pages of his books, but think of what it was like for those living it! As I relive this story, I find myself having nightmares from deeply ingrained memories that will live in the recesses of my mind, forever. Alas, justice has been a long time coming, but true-love persevered and produces a HUGE surprise ending! I've lived the nightmare - but also the dream." —**Safely Anonymous.**

Vol-6: Africa's Snow White

Oh ... Canada

By: JONATHAN ELOFF (Some 2nd Ed. scenes co-written by Nicholas Strauss)

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"The course of true-love never did run smooth" (Midsummer night's dream)

Wouldn't it be nice if, in real-life, this love story was frozen in time, say after the next few chapters? Around Christmastime 1975. As the author, that's where I would have chosen to end a fictional love-story - and I know several people in the real-life version who really would have liked that a lot! But I also know of others who wanted this story to end right now, before Chapter-1 or sooner - unhappily ever after! The elusive "happily ever after", already 5yrs. in the making at the start of this book, stays elusive for years to come, as a key part of this African love-story, is forced to move to N. America for 27yrs. which is where, a decade or so later, I come into this story. Still, I want you to believe in the power of true-love - because they did. If it's uncomfortable for you, just imagine what it was like for them? Well now ... it's time to read on.

Africa's Snow White v6 *Oh...*

Canada (e-Book PDF version)

<https://amongfriends.us/downloads.php>

By: JONATHAN ELOFF (Some 2nd. Ed. scenes co-written by Nicholas Strauss)

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Because the "Africa's Snow-White" series of novels have a fairytale feel about them, people may assume that they're works of fiction, but the places & characters, as well as almost all the incidents, are quite real! The specific dialogue, however, is a product of the author's imagination. Names have been changed to protect identities of some characters the guilty and the innocent. [Photos (L) Denise & Nicholas 1976 (R) Denise & Lizzie 2015, still good friends after 40y. Both are **Breast-cancer** survivors! There's no need to change Denise's name, there's only nice things to say of her!]

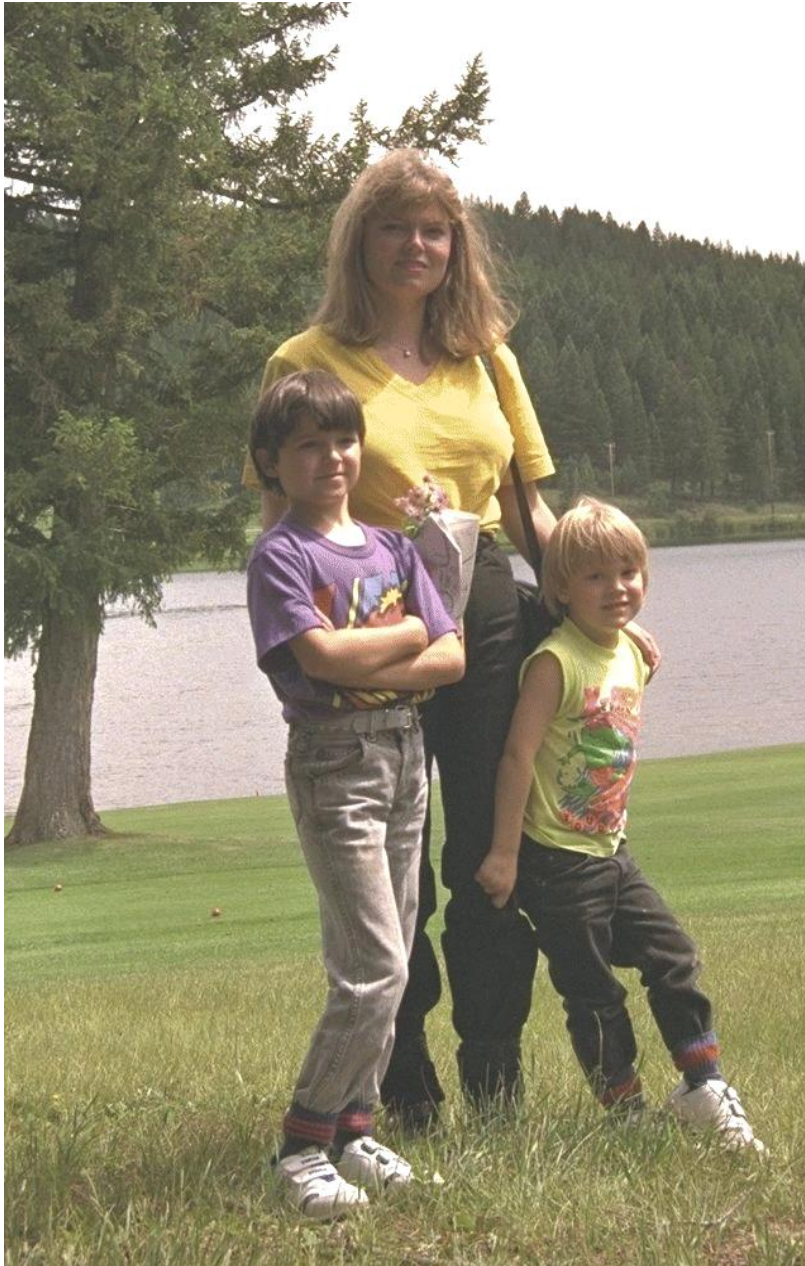


THE TRUTH BEHIND THE FICTION

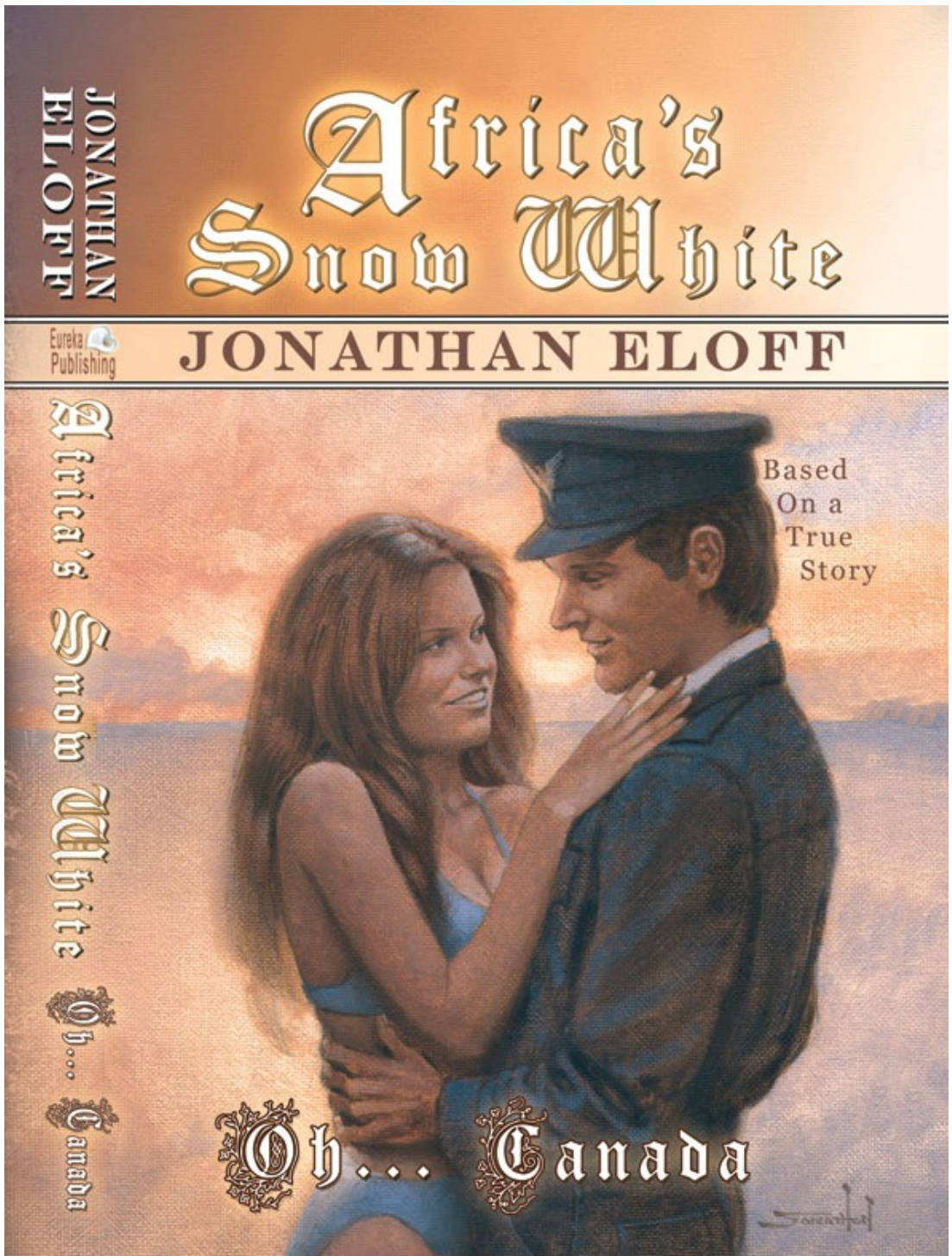
I can't take credit for the real story, since it's older than I am. What you're about to read is a compilation of actual events, involving characters who, for the most part, are still alive today. With only minor exceptions, I wrote everything as it was described to me by the people who were there to witness these events, and not merely as my imagination would have dictated. The result was a surprising mix of the mystery, laughter, tears, and heart-wrenching scenes which typify real life. The more I researched and wrote, the more I realized that imagination was almost superfluous to the process, which I suppose makes me more of a journalist than a novelist. That said I didn't go looking for this story. It was under my nose for many years before I actually saw it for what it was, and when I saw it, I realized it had to be written down before it died along with its characters. So read knowing that as you do, you're turning through the pages of history. By the end of the series you'll fully appreciate why I chose the title of **Africa's Snow White**. The first six novels are done the 7th & 8th still planned ([Note to readers: They're done now, written by Jon's dad](#)) That will bring about an interim conclusion to this real life fairy tale, without which I would not have been born. There may be 9th & 10th novels, at a later date, which will conclude the story in its entirety. Until then, fasten your seat-belts for a wild ride. Along the way, you will get to see where I fit into this story, and along with me, you will get to attend 3 weddings on three continents, but not even that's as simple as it sounds! Sensing that my relation to some characters would take the passionate edge off the story, I enlisted help from some of the story's real-life characters to co-write scenes, to make the romance & passion inherent in the story come back to life again. I'd have to say they did a good job of that, but relax, this is still a teen-friendly series, though in real-life there were characters in this story who were not at all friendly to the sweet, innocent teenage lovers. What a shame! Oh well, without them there would be no story, as all Fairy-tales need dastardly villains ... as well as innocent victims. Villains fuel all of these stories! **But the most intriguing aspect** of this real-life fairy tale, is that whilst this love story seems to begin with 15y old Elizabeth & 16y old Nicholas meeting, in the Wilderness national park in South Africa, in 1971; without them suspecting it also picks-up from a tearful farewell of their direct French Huguenot ancestors 15y old Genevieve & 16y old Charl, on the dockside in 1700's France. Both love-stories finally having a happy ending, in South Africa, 7y+7m after their serendipitous 1971 reunion in 1979, or we can imagine, 2 1/2 centuries after that sad farewell in France! As you read, look for "the Ring", a nondescript little silver amethyst ring given to French Huguenot Genevieve by her childhood sweetheart, 16y old Charles du Plessis, on the dockside, before his family escapes religious persecution in France to South Africa, hers escaping to safety in England, cruelly separating them and resulting in a 2 1/2 century old sad, unrequited love-story! Some readers may think of this as a "flights of fancy", but the supporting evidence is quite substantial, making it either a huge series of coincidences, or one of those strange series of events in life that, against all odds, defies any other normal explanations. We were saving this part of the love-story for novels after "the wedding", but those may never be published now, then this unique story would be lost forever. That would be a terrible shame! So newer editions of these novels have this story woven into their fabric, as it unfolded in real-life. We think you'll find the overlay of an older, but connected, unrequited love-story, within (and over the top of) their modern love-story, quite fascinating! **Additional footnote:** It wasn't known to Elizabeth or Nicholas when they first met and fell in love (maybe again?) and even not fully appreciated decades after that. It was hearsay that both had French Huguenot ancestry. Nicholas got a copy of the official book (University of Pretoria) detailing his family tree from forefather & foremother, in the 1700's, much later - when he was living in Panama (2011) That's 40y after their 1st meeting in 1971! Then it appeared there was an exact match in their ancestors! Then there's "the Ring". So, as you read these next 3 novels, you know a secret not even they knew - but both instinctively believed to be true.

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO:

All boys and girls who've grown-up in boarding schools—especially those who attended St. Andrew's School; all the girls who attended St. Michael's; all of the boys and girls who attended Huguenote High; to the citizens of Wellington; also to all the many people who found true love and discovered it was out of reach but went on reaching for it anyway; to all the victims of life's villains; Lastly, to Elizabeth, a truly splendid lady - shown here on one of her properties near Whitefish, MT, on the Western side of Glacier National park, with her two Canadian-born sons, at about age 34.



Serendipity?



Chapter 1

Elizabeth sat in the car beside her sister, enduring a painfully silent trip to Siesta. No mention had been made of the incidents which preceded the trip. Her mother hadn't tried to defend herself or Charles. Elizabeth could see from her mother's face that she was angry, but she wasn't willing to discuss what had happened, which was just fine with Elizabeth. She was angry, too, and she felt sure that this time her mother's ire couldn't possibly be any stronger. Elizabeth's was a righteous anger; she was just waiting for her mother to broach the topic so she could explode.

It was like that they traveled to Siesta, with two ticking time bombs in close proximity, both ready to go off at any moment. Edwin seemed aware of his plight and made an endless stream of silly jokes to defuse the situation, but he ended up laughing at them all by himself. Hattie, for her part, was trying to sink into the leather padding of the backseat.

But miraculously, both Elizabeth and Constance seemed content to travel the entire way in silence. Elizabeth soon grew suspicious and irritated with the silence. *She knows she's guilty! That's why she doesn't say anything!*

Soon they came to a familiar, memorable point in the journey. The lush green trees rushed by in a blur to their left, while to their right an endless vista of ocean and river and sky stretched out to the horizon. Far below and in the distance, stretching across the mouth of the mighty Kaaimans River, was a semi-circular train bridge with a long black train chugging along it. The train traveled high above the river delta, pumping clouds of billowing white steam into the air. Beyond both the train and bridge, the ocean sparkled warmly in the sun. Waves periodically rolled in to shore on crests of white foam, reaching the sand and rushing up the bright golden beaches as if to wash the feet of the dense green jungles crowded up against the shores.

When they finally arrived at Siesta, there came a collective sigh of relief from the travelers, and they all climbed eagerly out of the car. Elizabeth immediately walked off by herself. Edwin looked tired and world-weary from the trip. Now without Elizabeth to

listen in, Constance began to unburden herself, and Edwin's expression became truly pitiable. He had endured his wife's ranting for a day-and-a-half already, and now on vacation, too! This was too much. But he knew he would have even less peace if he said anything about it. He should have stayed at home. At least there he could go to work to get away from her.

"She's such a miserable daughter! How could we have raised her? You spoiled her, Edwin, you know that don't you? All your constant smothering attention on that girl, and look what you've caused! Look at Hattie. *She* wouldn't dare humiliate us like this."

Hattie seemed to grow taller with this unaccustomed praise. "Of course I wouldn't, mother."

Constance gave Hattie a quick look; her lips curled briefly with loathing, then she returned her attention to Edwin and her prior rant as though Hattie hadn't spoken. "You cannot stand by while your daughter disrespects me like this. What kind of man are you? What kind of husband? Are you're planning to talk to her?"

Edwin sighed as he went about unhooking the trailer from the car. "What would you have me say?"

"Anything! Put her in her place, Edwin! I shouldn't have to tell you what to do, you know. You're a grown man, supposedly intelligent, figure it out!"

"Yes, dear. . . ."

An hour later, when Edwin had just finished erecting the tent in front of their camper to give them more living space, he tracked down his eldest daughter at the. There she sat, all alone, arms crossed and gazing out over the Touws River where it met with the Serpentine River. He'd never spent much time in the Siestuary, but it was a beautifully kept little garden, full of hanging bougainvilleas, weeping willows, and arum Lilies. Once, many years ago, he'd tried to interest Constance in sitting there on the bench with him, but she'd recoiled from him as though he were a snake, saying, "Do I look like I'm ready to die?" He'd been confused by her reaction and told her, "no, of course not." And she'd replied, "Well, then don't ask me to bore myself to death." Sometimes Edwin wondered about these things. He wondered about a lot of things. But a man doesn't question the choices of his youth and wish for better ones. He lives with his decisions and makes the best of them. *True love isn't about appreciating a person's good points*, he decided. *It's about accepting their faults.*

Now, as Edwin crept into the Siestuary to confront his daughter, he felt a familiar spear of dread go lancing through his heart. It was a sharp, piercing burst of adrenaline. He had it whenever he had to confront his wife with some trifling matter.

Sometimes he felt like it was a sign that he was just about to have a heart attack. Maybe he was. Maybe that wouldn't be so bad.

"Elizabeth?" he called out tremulously in order to catch her attention. He resented the tremor in his voice, but he couldn't take it back now. Elizabeth turned to look at him.

"Hello, Dad."

He felt encouraged that she hadn't exploded at him or given him a freezing look as his wife might have done, so he took another step toward his daughter, and then another, until he was standing beside her bench. "May I sit down?"

"Okay."

He sat beside her for a long moment, keeping to himself as he was accustomed. He was briefly tempted to wrap his arm around Elizabeth's shoulders, but seeing her still-crossed arms, he thought better of it.

After a while, Elizabeth asked, "Dad, did you know about it?"

"Know about what, sweetheart?"

"You know what. I heard you and mom talking to Charles before he left. I know you must have talked about it."

Edwin was on shaky ground now and he knew it. He couldn't admit to knowing anything. His wife would kill him. Or leave him. Or leave him and then kill him. Charles had explained everything. Edwin had been shocked, but his wife had told him to keep it to himself, and she had told Charles not to worry. Constance planned to slowly discredit everything Charles's driver had said. There were no other witnesses. No one else could confirm or deny the accusations. Elizabeth wouldn't place much trust in one man, a relative stranger, over her mother and fiancé both, so Constance planned to feed her daughter's doubts until Elizabeth questioned everything and felt so confused that she didn't know which way was up. Then, in that moment, Charles could return and ask for her hand in marriage once more. That was his wife's plan, and she would never forgive him if he revealed it. She'd entrusted him with those details, and he felt privileged because she rarely let him in on her plans. All those plans would be moot, however, if it turned out that Elizabeth had overheard them.

"What did you hear, my dear?"

"You tell me, Dad."

He sighed. "Lizzie, things are not always what they seem."

"Oh, really? How is it then that Charles knew Nicholas was coming to my matric farewell? Can you explain that?"

Edwin decided to play ignorant. "*I never saw him.*"

"He must have come to the house looking for me, Dad!"

He smiled weakly. "If he did, I didn't know about it." It was all

true, and Elizabeth could see it in his eyes.

She frowned now, hurt and betrayal flashing in her own eyes. "Even if you didn't know, Mom must have."

"Are you sure that all of what Charles's driver told you is true?"

"What do you mean? Why would he lie?"

"Charles told us how his driver hates him and how the man is ungrateful and has just been waiting to betray him."

"Betray him with the truth?"

"How do you know what's true?" he asked.

"I don't! That's the problem! Everyone keeps lying to me, and I feel like now even you are doing it!" She turned to him; tears were shining in her eyes, making them bluer. "Please go."

Edwin felt that request stab him straight in the heart. He swallowed past the lump in his throat and then nodded. "Okay." He stood up from the bench, but before he left, he turned to her and said. "Give your mother a chance to explain, Elizabeth. That's all I'm asking. Maybe you have a right to be mad, but don't be so quick to turn on her without giving her a chance to defend herself. Give her the benefit of the doubt at least."

Elizabeth looked straight at him. "Are you sure she deserves the benefit of the doubt, Dad?"

He looked away. "She's your mother, Elizabeth." And with that, he walked away, as if that statement could explain everything.

Elizabeth didn't feel like it explained anything at all, but doubt began gnawing at her. What if James had been lying just to get Charles into trouble? She had certainly noticed that Charles and his driver didn't have a good relationship. Charles never treated his driver well. She'd assumed it was all in good fun, just more of Charles's teasing, but now she began to wonder if maybe his driver had started it. What if James had only told her half-truths? She had no way of knowing what was true.

Elizabeth burst into tears. She didn't know who to trust!

* * *

"She's weakening, Charles. I've spent the last two weeks undermining her faith in your worthless driver," Constance was twirling the phone cord around her finger. This was an expensive phone call. She'd had to beg Mr. Nixon to use his phone. She hated him for it, almost as much as she hated him for the unreasonable fortune he was charging per minute for his phone, but this was a call she simply had to make.

"He's not my driver anymore," Charles was quick to say.

"You must come to Siesta, Charles. Come with the ring, propose to her again, here in Siesta. I know just where you should do it. There's a place down by the river and beside a hotel

called the Fairy Knowe. They'll be having a dance there tomorrow night. Take her to the dance and propose to her outside the hotel, down by the river and the boats, under the moon and stars and the palm trees swaying in the breeze."

"I had no idea you were such a romantic, Mrs. Smythe."

"Don't be silly. I'm telling you to propose to her there, because it's where she and Nicholas shared their first kiss."

"Ah . . . are you sure that's such a good plan?"

"Of course it is! You'll eradicate a fond memory with a much fonder one. She'll never have to look back and wonder about that boy she once knew. Every time she tries to remember him and picture him in scenes from her childhood, she'll remember and picture you instead. Don't you see? She's mad at you because of him. Because you forced her to leave her childhood sweetheart behind. Show her that you've replaced him with someone better. It will be just the thing to help her finally move on from him."

"You don't think she's moved on?" he asked incredulously.

"She had, until this awful business reminded her of him, making her wonder whether he disappeared out of her life for the right reasons or because of us. She feels manipulated, Charles. Suddenly it's not a question of fate or of her choices, or of any of the reasonable concerns over her and Nicholas. Thanks to your driver, she feels like she was forced to choose you over Nicholas, and it's making it impossible for her to see reason."

"So then why do you want me to come? I'm not going to propose only to have her throw the ring in the water."

"No, no, you're not listening. I told you I've successfully cast doubt on everything your driver said. She doesn't fully trust him anymore. She doesn't trust you fully either, but with both of us telling her that your driver was lying to get you into trouble, we can twist this around and make him look like the bad guy."

"But that's not entirely true."

"Charles, listen carefully."

"I'm listening."

"What would be better for Elizabeth? Let her end up with Nicholas, or with you?"

"Well, of course I'll be better for her."

"Then let's not discuss the rightness or wrongness of our actions, because they are all in her best interests. Sometimes one must do a little evil to do a lot of good. And then one must question whether that little evil was really evil at all."

"Yes . . . I think I see your point."

"Good. Get down here as quickly as you can."

"I'll be there tomorrow afternoon."

“Until then, my future son-in-law.”

“Until then, Mum.”

With that, Constance put down the phone and turned with a smile to Mr. Nixon's maid. She was an old black lady, Constance didn't recognize her, but they all looked the same to her. The old woman was looking at her archly as she paused in mid-sweep of the floor. Constance smiled broadly, shaking her head, feigning innocence. “Children! They don't know what's best for them.”

The old lady gave no reply. She simply resumed sweeping while Constance turned and left.

* * *

The following day Nicholas arrived at the Hercules Transport hangars in AFB Ysterplaat, which was attached to the Cape Town International Airport. Sergeant Koets had arranged for him to fly as a passenger aboard an old military Dakota which would take him from Cape Town as far as the airport in George, a city very close to the Wilderness. There, his father would pick him up and drive him through to Siesta. He would have a whole week with his family, including Christmas Eve and Christmas Day—a whole week to find Elizabeth and see if there was anything left of their relationship to justify his lingering feelings for her. He hoped that if there wasn't, she'd find a way to let him down gently.

As Nicholas waited to board the Dakota, a new concern occurred to him. If Elizabeth were there in Siesta with Charles, Nicholas wondered if he would even bother to approach her or if he would just let them be. If they were still together after more than a year had passed. . . .

Would he even have a right to ask for answers? Wouldn't seeing Charles there with her *be* the answer he was looking for? He wasn't sure what he would do in that case.

He checked his watch. It was still early morning. His estimated arrival time at the airport in George was just after 2 o'clock. His dad would probably already be there waiting. Nicholas felt a flutter of anxiety as he thought about it. *Soon, very soon*, he thought and closed his eyes, trying to imagine Siesta. It had been two years since he'd last seen it: the warm sun upon his face, the roar of the surf and the constant *swish* of water rushing up the beach; the salty spray of the waves, a clear blue sky and sparkling, luminous blue water stretching out as far as the eye could see; and then something more luminous still—Elizabeth smiling at him, her eyes a brighter, truer blue than either water or sky . . . her lips soft and caressing against his own. Nicholas opened his eyes with a bittersweet smile. Maybe those memories were all he'd ever have, but it was time for him to find out.

Chapter 2

Elizabeth lay on the warm sand by the edge of the lagoon. The lagoon was all but cut off from the Touws River by a thick reef of sand. Here, people from all over the Wilderness came to congregate and enjoy the giant, natural swimming pool. Elizabeth was there with her family, enjoying the sunny weather and trying to put aside all her swirling doubts. She and her mother had traded very few words over the past two weeks, but her mother had somehow made one thing abundantly clear: Elizabeth was a foolish little girl. She'd thrown everything away, all on the word of one man, a man who secretly held a grudge against his employer. Her mother had explained about James's sick wife, and how Charles's father hadn't allowed James to go see her because Charles needed James to drive him to and from university every day.

Elizabeth's eyes had been opened with that revelation and suddenly she'd seen clearly how James had every reason in the world to betray Charles and lie about him. Now she felt really bad. How could she have taken James's word over that of her future husband? And even over the word of her own mother? It was almost unforgivable. Elizabeth didn't know how she could ever apologize, but she knew she had to try. Even if she couldn't get Charles back, she had to at least find some way to let him know she was sorry. She couldn't live like this, with so much guilt and regret weighing her down!

Abruptly, Elizabeth stood up from the beach. Constance looked up from reading a magazine, her pale blue eyes shielded from the sun by a pair of oversized dark glasses.

"I'm going to the store to get an ice cream," Elizabeth said, hoping the ice cream would make her feel better.

Constance nodded. "Take Hattie with you. Hattie? Go make sure your sister doesn't get herself into trouble."

Hattie rose to her feet. "Of course, Mother. Come on, Elizabeth," Hattie said, already leading the way.

Elizabeth frowned as she followed her younger sister. She'd always been her parents' favorite, but after she'd lost Charles, all

of that had changed. Elizabeth wasn't used to being the black sheep in the family.

As they walked down Sands Road to the corner store, Hattie smiled at Elizabeth, "Mom seems pretty mad at you, huh?"

Elizabeth studied her younger sister's gleeful expression, taking a moment to resent her sister for it before she replied, "No, I'm going to fix things. I don't know how, but I will."

"Mom says you really messed up this time. She says she doesn't know how she'll ever forgive you."

Elizabeth felt a sharp stab of dread from hearing those words, but she shook her head. "Let's just enjoy the day, okay? I don't want to be thinking and talking about this all the time."

"Sure," Hattie replied, overly cheerful. "It is a lovely day!"

Elizabeth nodded and smiled with false cheer. It was a miserable day.

* * *

Charles checked into the Wilderness Hotel in the early afternoon. The hotel was down by the lagoon at the mouth of the Touws River and close to the beach. He could see both the lagoon and its myriad beach-goers from the window in his room on the fourth floor of the Wilderness Hotel. He left the room just as his new chauffeur, Thomas, and the bell boy came in with his luggage.

He turned from the window and nodded to Thomas on his way out. "I'm going for a stroll."

"Very good, sir," Thomas said. "I'll unpack for you so long."

"Thank you, Thomas."

He'd planned to travel to the Wilderness in his Porsche with Elizabeth, but she'd ruined that plan. Charles had taken the time, sitting in the back of the Mercedes, to plan out his re-proposal to Elizabeth. He wasn't entirely in agreement with Constance that he should propose to Elizabeth at the site of her first kiss with Nicholas. If it worked, it would be a great way to eradicate his memory, but with the potential for so many conflicting thoughts and feelings, there was a much greater chance that Elizabeth would reject him, and he wasn't sure he wanted to take the risk—especially now that her trust in him had been so horribly shaken. Maybe a better opportunity would present itself. Either way, he still had some time to think about it before the dance tonight.

As Charles walked down the road from the hotel, he saw a small corner store in the distance up ahead. On a whim he turned toward it, thinking to buy himself a nice, cold Coke. If he were to go for a walk along the beach in this hot, unrelenting sun, he'd thank himself later for having had the foresight to buy a drink to quench his thirst.

Elizabeth and Hattie reached the store and walked inside. For a moment, coming from the brightness outside, the store seemed to be shrouded in utter darkness, and they couldn't see a thing, but their eyes quickly adjusted and then fell upon the freezers. Now hot and thirsty from the walk, the thought of ice cream had become even more appealing. They walked straight up to the freezer and each selected an ice cream.

The doorbells chimed as another customer entered the store. Elizabeth caught only a glimpse of the top of his head over the aisles of groceries as she and Hattie made their way to the checkout counter. He was heading for the back of the store where the sodas were. From what she saw she thought he might have been handsome, but with his back turned, it was hard to tell. Either way, she didn't care—she'd had enough trouble with guys without trying to borrow more.

They paid for their ice creams and began the long walk back. Elizabeth allowed herself to focus on the moment, pretending that nothing more than that existed. There were no regrets, no mistakes, no guilt, no worries, no future, no past—just now, walking back along Sands Rd. eating her ice cream. The hot sun burned down on them and melted their ice creams faster than they could eat them, leaving sticky rivulets of sugared cream to dry on their hands. "Let's go down to sea to wash our hands," Elizabeth said, as she finished her ice cream.

"Race you there!" Hattie said, bounding past her. Elizabeth wasn't in the mood for childish games. Her world had grown too serious for that. She just watched her sister run down to the water, taking her own sweet time to get there.

It didn't seem to matter how bright and sunny the day was. She felt dark clouds of despair gathering. The air seemed thick with anticipation, just as it did before a tremendous storm. She felt her life was balanced on the point of a knife. Everything was changing, everything was spiraling out of her control. Everything was upside down! Elizabeth choked back a sob and forced herself not to cry. This was the worst vacation ever!

Charles crossed Sands Road and started walking down along it. The air had a fresh, salty, seawater tang, and the breeze was warm as it swept off the sand, bringing with it the smell of the blooming bougainvillea bushes growing along the road. The surf was booming and sweeping up the shore. Charles let out a long sigh and took a sip from the bottle of Coke he'd bought at the corner store. He reached into his pocket to feel for the

engagement ring he'd secreted there. Ever since leaving for Siesta, he had carried the ring everywhere with him like a lucky charm. He was just waiting for the chance to return it to its rightful owner. He took the ring out now and studied it in his palm. It was a three stone diamond setting, over two carats in total - easily worth as much as a car. So tiny, yet so valuable . . .

Suddenly Charles looked up from studying the ring and glanced around, feeling nervous, as though someone were watching him and had realized what a treasure he held in his palm, but there was no one. He dropped the ring back into his pocket and patted it through the fabric of his white tennis shorts to assure himself that the ring was safe.

Elizabeth would take him back. Now that Constance assured him that all James's revelations had been set right and cast as convincing lies, surely Elizabeth wouldn't resist him. And besides, what other choice did she have? She would never find another Charles Atherton, of that much he was sure. *We don't grow on trees*, he thought, chuckling to himself.

Before he'd finished that thought, Charles's gaze unconsciously found a pair of particularly attractive young girls walking along the beach in front of him. They were walking close to the water's edge, wearing nothing but their bikini swimsuits—one blue, the other green. The girls had no doubt just gone for a swim. Charles couldn't help but stare. He felt a flicker of guilt, but Elizabeth wasn't around, so there was nothing wrong with looking. . . . He frowned. Something was very familiar about one of those girls.

Suddenly, Charles made the connection to the girl's blue bikini, and her unusually attractive figure. There was a reason he found her so attractive. *No, it can't be*, he argued to himself, and then he wondered: *Is this fate?*

That girl in the blue bikini was Elizabeth. He was sure of it! Charles reached into his pocket for the ring once more and smiled as his hand closed around it. Suddenly he had a better plan to propose to her. He'd run up behind her and surprise her. He'd apologize and explain the whole *misunderstanding* if the need arose. He would stick to the story that he and Constance had devised—that James had lied about everything in order to get revenge. Then, once all that bad blood was out of the way and Elizabeth was feeling appropriately guilty and looking for a way to make it up to him, Charles would propose to her again—right there and then on the beach.

Charles grinned, tossing an empty bottle alongside the road. It landed on the sandy shoulder with a *thud*. He was just about to launch into a sprint to run after Elizabeth when an old white

truck roared past him, kicking up a cloud of dust that burned his eyes and left him coughing. When he'd recovered enough to shake his fist at the driver, he found himself staring in horror at the scene which was unfolding before his eyes.

He couldn't believe it. It couldn't be!

* * *

Nicholas's father was driving back from George with the windows open, and the wind was threatening to steal Nicholas's air force cap from his head. He removed it and placed the cap in his lap. The warm, rushing air was fragrant with the flowers and blossom trees. Those sweet fragrances mingled with the salty air evoked a rainbow-colored swirl of fond memories from his youth. They turned onto Sands Rd. and now they were driving along the beach. It ran beside them like an endless golden thread between them and the ocean. Nicholas was hot from the long journey and he longed to just hop out of the truck, run down the beach, and dive in. Johann saw the eager look in his son's eyes and grinned.

"We'll be there soon."

"Soon won't be soon enough for me," Nicholas replied.

Johann chuckled.

"And Elizabeth?" Nicholas inquired anxiously. He'd avoided asking until now, fearing the answers he'd get.

"She's in Siesta."

"You've seen her, then?"

"Yes," Johann nodded once, not venturing any further details.

"Is she . . ."

Reading his son's mind, he said, "Yes, she's alone, Nick."

His heart soared with those words. Surely if she were still together with Charles, he would be here with her?

In that moment they passed by a young man walking along the side of the road. He was dressed in white shorts and a matching polo shirt, looking fit to play tennis rather than go to the beach. They rumbled past him and kicked up a cloud of dust. Nicholas looked in his side view mirror and grimaced to see that young man coughing into his sleeve. When the man stopped coughing long enough to look up, Nicholas felt a flash of recognition hit him like a slap in the face.

No . . . Nicholas argued with himself, peering more closely into the mirror, but the man was now too far away to recognize more than the most basic aspects of his appearance.

Nicholas shook his head and looked away, discounting what he thought he'd seen. Those were just his fears causing his eyes to play tricks on him. Now his gaze wandered down the beach and settled on a pair of young women walking along the water's edge

next to the road As Nicholas studied them, he felt another flash of recognition, but this time it set his heart pounding with excitement. From the one girl's long, chestnut brown hair and her distinctive figure and pale blue bikini, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt exactly who it was!

“Dad! Stop the truck. Please—stop the truck! Quick!”

“What?” Johann looked puzzled as he braked, slowing down.

“Just please stop the truck! I need to get out!”

Johann pulled over and ground to a stop in the sand and gravel alongside the road. Then he watched with bemusement as his son rushed to climb out of the truck, expecting that Nicholas was perhaps feeling uncharacteristically car sick. But instead Nicholas ran down onto the beach, not even bothering to close the door behind him. Johann called after him, “Waar gaan jy?” *Where are you going?* But Nicholas appeared not to have heard; he just kept running - towards two girls with their backs turned to him. Still dressed in his air force uniform, his cap managing to stay on his head as he ran. Johann wondered what this was all about—then it struck him. That was Elizabeth and her sister. He had the answer to his question.[†] He smiled, “Ja nee, dit is darem waare liefde vir jou.” *Yes, this is clearly a case of true love rediscovered!*



[†] It would be superfluous to footnote everything in these books that happened in real life, because most things did, however, this serendipitous meeting was such a pivotal one, it bears special mention! The cover is a recreation from a description of that scene, and done from period photos of Elizabeth and Nicholas, by a world-famous artist.

Chapter 3

As Nicholas ran up behind Elizabeth, his mind swirled with doubts, fears, hope, joy—a thousand conflicting emotions were all warring for his attention. Now just a few paces away from her, he was surer than ever that the girl in the pale blue bikini walking in front of him was Elizabeth. He barely slowed as he reached her, colliding with her and wrapping his arms around her from behind. “Elizabeth!” he called out, into her ear.

She struggled instinctively, but then she seemed to recognize his voice, and she whirled around into his arms, looking up at him with a delighted smile. “Nicholas! What . . . how?” She shook her head in disbelief. Tears of joy shone brightly in her eyes, as Nicholas wrapped her in his arms once more, this time lifting her off her feet and spinning her in a happy circle, both of them laughing, tears spilling over their cheeks. Finally he set her down. The girl who’d been walking with Elizabeth stood quietly off to one side. Nicholas recognized her, it was Hattie, but he didn’t address her yet. His entire focus was reserved for Lizzie.

“Oh, I’ve missed you, Elizabeth!” Nicholas exclaimed.

Elizabeth suddenly became shy, and seemed unsure of what to say next, so Nicholas took a quick step forward and removed the need for her to say anything at all. Taking her face in both his hands, looking into her eyes, searching, he lifted her lips to his, and then kissed her long and ardently. At first she resisted, but Nicholas’s passion quickly won her over. When at last he broke away, he looked deep into her eyes, and gently shook his head, smiling and saying, “You can’t tell me you didn’t miss me, too, Lizzie. It’s too late for you to say that now, Lizzie—I know you did!”

Lizzie smiled wanly up at him, her eyes and expression softening. “Of course I’ve missed you, Nicholas, it’s just that . . . it’s been such a long time. So much has happened.”

Nicholas tilted his head to one side as he asked, “Too long?”

Rather than answer him directly, Elizabeth turned to her sister and said, “Hattie, I’ll meet you back at the lagoon.”

Reluctantly, Hattie walked off and Nicholas nodded briefly to

her as she left. He began to feel a return of his former dread. Why hadn't Elizabeth answered his question? Turning his attention back to her, he inquired, "What now, Lizzie?"

"Let's go for a walk," she said, nodding down at the beach. As they walked together, he felt Elizabeth take his hand. He glanced down at their hands, then up at her. She gave him a faintly reassuring smile and squeezed his hand. He couldn't take it any longer. The awkward silence was unnerving him, so he asked the question that had been burning a hole in his heart for more than a year now.

"Lizzie, why did you invite me to your Matric Farewell dance — but then decide to go with Charles instead of me?"

Elizabeth abruptly stopped walking and let go of his hand. She stopped in front of him, staring incredulously at him for a long moment. He read a thousand conflicting thoughts into her expression before she spoke. "What do you mean, Nicholas? I went with him because you never responded to my invitation! I thought you couldn't come, or maybe you just didn't want to. And you had *promised* to write me when you got to Pretoria! You never did, so why *wouldn't* I go with him instead of you?"

Nicholas's expression became one of horror and disbelief. "But Lizzie, I did write to you! I wrote twice! First I wrote to give you my address, and then I wrote to tell you I was coming. I even called your house and asked your mom to give you that message!" Before Nicholas could continue, Lizzie interrupted.

"You what?" Elizabeth shook her head. "I didn't receive any letters—not one! And my mom didn't pass on any messages. Are you sure you're not just making this up? Please be honest!"

* * *

Hattie was walking up toward the lagoon, the unwilling bearer of bad news. *Why should I have to be the one to tell Mother about Nicholas?* She knew how her mother would react to the news. She also knew that she, as simply the messenger, would somehow be blamed for it. No, the best would be to wait until Elizabeth returned and broke the news to their mother herself. Hattie made a quick diversion to the edge of the lagoon to go for a swim instead. Elizabeth could be her own bearer of bad news.

* * *

Nicholas's brow furrowed. "What do you mean you didn't receive any letters? I sent them, but I never received a reply to either of them, and it's just not possible for both to get lost!"

"You didn't receive a reply because I never received any letter. Besides, where was I to send any letters to?"

"Well, it wasn't just the letters, remember, I told you I called

and spoke with your mother on the phone. . . .”

“My mother . . . ?” Elizabeth seemed to disappear into her thoughts, her eyes glazing with a faraway look.

Nicholas went on, “Yes, she answered the phone. I asked to speak with you, but apparently you weren't there to speak to, so I asked her to pass on the message that I would be coming to take you to your Matric Farewell—that I'd be there at seven.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “If this is really true”

“Well, I don't know what else to say. I went to great expense and trouble to get all the way from Pretoria to Wellington in the middle of my basic training, to take you to that dance, and when I arrived, I found that you'd already left with Charles.”

Elizabeth was still shaking her head, as though she were either unwilling or unable to accept the truth of those words. “If that's true, then my mother, Charles, my father—*everyone* has been lying to me!” She looked to be on the verge of tears, so Nicholas stepped forward and enfolded her in a hug.

“I'm sure there's some other reasonable explanation, Lizzie.”

“There isn't!” she answered back, already crying.

He held on to her a moment longer so she could pull herself together, and then she withdrew and wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands. When he looked at her, he was surprised to see that she was angry rather than sad.

“You look like you need to sit down,” Nicholas said. He pointed up ahead to some large smooth black rocks running along the edge of the lagoon at the mouth of the Touws River. “Come on,” he said, and took her hand, leading her to them.

They walked over to the rocks, Lizzie still crying, and found one with a flat top, then sat down. There was a colorful, tidal pool at their feet, crowded with coral and little crustaceans.

Nicholas watched Lizzie staring deeply into that little pool, waiting for her to explain. Eventually, with a hoarse, throaty whisper, she spoke: “Then James was right, about everything!”

“James?”

Elizabeth looked up at him, her expression calmer now. Instead of the angry lines, there was only a hard, determined set to her eyes and mouth. “Charles's driver,” she said, as if that should explain everything. When Nicholas still looked confused, she went on, “He told me that you came to take me to the dance that day. He also told me that Charles deliberately sabotaged our meeting at the train station in Worcester.” She shook her head slowly, and her attention wandered back to the tidal pool. “But then they lied about it to cover it all up. . . .,” she said softly. “And I believed them!” She kicked the placid waters of the tidal pool,

stirring up what were surely tsunamis to the terrified crabs and crayfish. They quickly scattered into their coral caves and hid until the waves passed.

Nicholas just sat there stunned, staring at Elizabeth and trying to make sense of what she was telling him.

"Wait, what meeting at Worcester?"

"After you left, and I read the poem you wrote for me, 'Summer love', I just had to see you one last time—to tell you how I felt, too. Mr. Gee offered to take me there, but Charles arrived just as I was going to accept his offer, and said he would take me. Charles took me on the main road instead of the back road that Mr. Gee was going to use. There'd been an accident along Du Toitskloof Pass. Charles had heard about it on the radio. He ordered his driver to go that way, knowing the pass would be blocked."

"I don't believe it . . . I mean I do, but that's a terrible thing to do to you! And to me—but I'm not surprised about that."

"And somehow Charles knew you were coming to take me to my Matric Farewell," Elizabeth said, the anger creeping into her voice once more. "He *knew* you were coming Nicholas." She stared at Nicholas long and hard until he understood the significance of that.

Nicholas's eyes lit with understanding. "Your mother! She's the only one that knew and could intercept my letters! I called her to let her know I was coming. She knew exactly when I would arrive to pick you up. Nobody else knew that, only her!"

Elizabeth was nodding now. "Someone had to have known you were coming in order to tell Charles. She was the only one you spoke to—yes, I'm beginning to think that just maybe she knows something about your missing letters, too!"

"But how did James know all of this?" Nicholas asked.

"I don't know how, but there's no other explanation. And he couldn't have been lying, because you've already confirmed what he said. There's no way for both of you to be lying about the same thing and corroborate each other's stories so well."

"Lizzie, I met your maid, Thandi, at Wellington station that Friday night as I arrived. We talked about you getting ready for the dance. She thought I was taking you—I told her I was. Didn't she ask you about the dance? She seemed excited for me—surely she would have asked about the dance?" Nicholas added.

"She never got that chance, Nicholas. It seems my mother fired her before she got the chance, probably to cover up"

"I'd never lie to you, Elizabeth," Nicholas said. "And here's another way you can know that—when you get back to Wellington, go speak with Mr. Gee. He drove me to your home at

6:30 that Friday night—and he was as baffled as I was!”

Elizabeth looked at him unblinkingly, studying him carefully before saying, “Forgive me, Nicholas. My fiancé, my mother and my dad all lied to me; it’s tough to know who I can trust.”

“Fiancé?” Nicholas echoed, his face paling.

“I’m sorry, I must have forgotten to mention that part.” She quickly reached out to grasp his arm. “He’s not my fiancé anymore, not since I found out about all of this a few weeks back.” Elizabeth shook her head. “But if you hadn’t run up behind me just now, and put your arms around me, he might well have found a way back into my heart with all his lies. My mother was starting to make me believe them—and hers, too!”

Nicholas let out a long breath. “So, what you’re telling me, is that you never *chose* Charles over me.”

“No, Nicholas, I didn’t choose. I thought you did. Remember our last Christmas Eve together, in our special place, at our waterfall, how I begged you to never just forget about me, to never just disappear and leave me wondering what’s happened to you?”

“Yes, Lizzie, of course I do. That was the best night of my life! I meant what I said—I would never do that to you, and I didn’t! By the way, the night of your dance, was the worst night of my life, and I thought you’d done that to me on purpose.”

Elizabeth looked at him, stunned, realizing that he’d again had to live almost two years of his life feeling rejected by her – feeling badly about her.

Nicholas let out a brief laugh. “This is all so unfair! We’ve been played for fools, Lizzie, and we both fell for it.”

“Yes. Unbelievable that people who claim to love me could lie to me and betray me so badly.” With that, Elizabeth stood up and held her hand out to Nicholas. “Come with me, Nicholas. It’s time for you and me to confront my mother with her lies.”

Nicholas hesitated a moment before he took her hand and joined her in standing. “Are you sure that’s such a good idea, Elizabeth? I don’t want to make an enemy of your mother.”

“It too late for that, Nicholas—I’d say we’ve nothing to lose.”

Those words haunted Nicholas’s every step as he walked beside Elizabeth up to the lagoon where a colorful swirl of beach-goers lay around beach umbrellas. What had he ever done to Constance to make her his enemy? He loved Elizabeth. Surely she knew that.

* * *

“He must be here by now, Edwin! Despite our daughter’s foolishness, I’m certain that damage will be repaired tonight.”

“Oh?” Edwin asked, almost afraid to inquire, lying on his beach towel, his face turned away from the sun. “And how is that?” He

couldn't afford to ignore his wife. He knew only that she'd spoken to Charles and told him to come to Siesta.

"I've instructed Charles to propose to Elizabeth again at Fairy Knowe tonight."

Edwin looked up, frowning, his eyes blinded by the glare. Raising a hand to shield his eyes, he turned toward his wife.

"Is that such a good idea? Didn't Nicholas and Elizabeth—"

Constance waved her hand quickly to dismiss the objection. "Yes, yes, I've thought about that. It's not a problem. Now that Elizabeth realizes that she was mistaken to believe James's lies, she'll not resist Charles's proposal. She'll be so eager to say yes, she won't even notice where she is until it's too late."

"Too late for what?" Edwin asked.

"Too late to preserve the memory of that horrible boy."

"I see." Edwin was sitting up now and looking around. "And by horrible boy you mean" Abruptly Edwin's head stopped turning, and he began to stare. He could hardly credit his eyes with what they were seeing, and for a long moment, he refused to believe it. Then the object of his scrutiny drew too near for any further doubt, and Edwin called out, "Nicholas!?"

Constance thought he was speaking to her, and said, "Yes, you know which horrible boy I'm talking about."

Edwin turned his expression fraught with astonishment. "No, Constance ... I mean *Nicholas!*"

"Yes, I heard you! Why must you repeat yourself nonsensically all the time? It's really very dull of you."

Edwin cleared his throat, turning from his wife, standing to greet someone. "Nicholas, I didn't think I'd ever see you again!"

Nicholas and Elizabeth stopped in front of him. Nicholas looked uncomfortable, and Elizabeth looked furious. "Yes, Dad, I suppose you and Mom were trying very hard to make certain that you'd never see Nicholas ever again. Good news," she said, her gaze turning past her father to settle upon her mother's horrified countenance. "You failed!"

Chapter 10

“How?” Constance screeched, jumping up in an instant.

Nicholas was taken aback by the outburst, and Elizabeth left his side to stand toe-to-toe with her mother. “Yes, how, Mother? How after you hid his letters and intercepted his phone call, all the while assuring me that his silence was nothing but a sign that I should move on? How, with all of that going against us, did we *still* end up together?”

Constance stepped forward, trying to loom over Elizabeth, but they stood precisely at eye level. “You ungrateful, wretched child! I don't know why I spend so much time considering your best interests. I should rather have just let you ruin your life!”

Edwin cleared his throat in that moment. “Excuse me, dear, but perhaps you'd like to sort out this little misunderstanding on a more appropriate occasion?”

Both Elizabeth and Constance turned on him, saying, “No!”

Edwin flinched, but recovered smoothly. Taking another tack, he turned to Nicholas and asked, “Well, shall we let the women talk a moment?” Edwin circled Nicholas's shoulders with his arm and began trying to lead him gently away.

But Nicholas didn't budge. He just shook his head. “I'm sorry, Mr. Smythe. I'm sure you can understand that after so much has happened to keep me and your daughter apart, I'm not going to let her out of my sight. Besides, I have as much right as anyone to know what really happened to keep us apart.”

Constance's gaze flicked from Edwin to Nicholas, and then back to Elizabeth. Elizabeth was smug but angry, and Constance smiled thinly at her daughter's defiance. “Well, it would seem you have found your backbone right where your father left his, my girl. Have a care that it doesn't get you into more trouble than you've bargained for.”

Edwin flinched, looking abruptly wounded, but said nothing.

Elizabeth smiled, turning to Nicholas. “I've made my choice, Mother. Despite all your attempts to interfere, I know what I want, and *who* I want. You can either accept that or not; it's now entirely up to you, and I'll no longer be swayed by you!”

Constance's face had flushed a deep shade of pink and her lips

were pressed into a bloodless line. Her pale blue eyes were bulging with some frightening build up of pressure. Nicholas feared she might explode at any moment.

Elizabeth went on blithely, perhaps hoping for exactly that outcome, "Nicholas, this might not be the best moment to mention it, but there's a dance tonight at Fairy Knowe" She turned abruptly shy and gazed at her feet as she went on, "I don't have anyone to take me," she said, looking up at him and smiling coyly.

Nicholas grinned and took a few quick steps forward to enfold Elizabeth in a hug. "Of course I'll take you, Lizzie!"

"You can't!" Constance finally exploded.

Elizabeth turned to her mother with a look of strained patience. "And why not, Mother?"

"Be-be-because!"

Now even Nicholas's eyebrows were raised. Surely Constance wasn't still trying vainly to fight against them. She'd lost. Her daughter had chosen. That was it ... wasn't it?

"Because of what, Mother?"

"You insolent little girl!" Constance screeched, and with that she spun on her heel and marched away. Edwin still standing beside Nicholas, was left gaping after his wife, and wondering if he should run after her.

"Why is she leaving?" Nicholas asked.

Elizabeth turned to him with a bitter smile. "Because she's a sore loser, that's why."

Nicholas felt awkward about being the cause of so much drama, but it wasn't exactly his fault. Nicholas could see that Edwin was still on the verge of running after his wife, and the imminence of his departure thrust a matter which Nicholas had been thinking about abstractly for some time to the forefront of his thoughts.

"Mr. Smythe?"

Edwin turned to him, as though in a daze, his eyebrows vaguely raised.

"Do you have your camera with you?"

"Why, yes, but . . ." Edwin shook his head, uncomprehending.

"Would you mind taking a picture of Elizabeth and me?"

"Ah . . ." Edwin cast a quick glance after his wife's retreating form. "Now?" he asked turning back to Nicholas.

"If you wouldn't mind."

Edwin looked torn, and chewed his lower lip a moment. "Okay, but let's make it quick."

He fetched his camera from the colorful beach bag and then

counted to three while Nicholas and Elizabeth posed for him, both wrapped in one another's arms. Edwin didn't waste time or film by taking more than one picture. When he was done, he hurriedly set the camera aside, and then dismissed himself with a nod and a smile in their direction. "I'd better go see what I can do to calm your mother down," he said, speaking to Elizabeth.

With that, Edwin ran off, calling, "Constance! Dear, come back, I'm sure we can sort all of this out" But she didn't even turn while marching resolutely down the beach as though she intended to follow the lagoon and river all the way back to Siesta.

Nicholas was still taken aback by all of this. He watched both of Elizabeth's parents leave and slowly shook his head. "Well," he said, "that could have gone better."

"Don't worry about them, Nicholas. They're my parents. They'll be back."

Nicholas tightened his hold on her, and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Elizabeth—I really am!"

She looked up at him with a reassuring smile. "Don't be. *You* didn't do anything wrong." With that, she stood on tip toes and kissed him on the lips. In that moment, everything else ceased to matter. All the forces and manipulations which had strived to keep them apart had failed. The way in which they had been reunited had been perfect, almost too perfect, as though someone or something had been looking out for them.

Now that they'd found each other again, they didn't want to let go. Were it not for Hattie who came to interrupt them, they might well have suffocated in one another's arms.

Hattie looked around curiously. "Where are Mom and Dad?"

"They went for a walk," Elizabeth said, dodging the question. "I suppose you didn't warn Mom that we were coming?"

Hattie shook her head. "I went for a swim first. I didn't think you'd get here so fast. . . ."

Elizabeth frowned, thinking about all the time she and Nicholas spent talking on the rocks beside the lagoon. They hadn't exactly hurried back, but Elizabeth let it go.

Hattie sat in her mother's chair and began to read a magazine.

Nicholas smiled ruefully and then turned to stare in the direction that Elizabeth's parents had gone. "I wonder if I shouldn't go try to speak to your mother?" he asked.

Lizzie shook her head. "It will only make things worse. When she's in a mood like this, it's best just to let her be. That's something not even my dad has learned after all these years."

"Well, what now, then?" Nicholas asked, glancing around. The beach sand was shimmering with heat. The deep blue water of

the lagoon looked inviting, but Nicholas was still fully dressed in his air force uniform, a fact of which he was painfully aware. He was practically dying from the heat. He reached up to undo another button on his shirt.

"Ummm . . ." Elizabeth gave Nicholas a quick look, taking note of his uniform, and then she shrugged. "It could be a while before my mother cools down enough to offer you a ride to Siesta . . . are you here with your parents?"

"Well, yes—" Nicholas laughed. "—come to think of it, I left my dad pulled over on the side of the road. I wonder if he's still there waiting for me. . . ."

Elizabeth joined his laughter with hers. "It's been quite a while, so I doubt it. I suppose you jumped out of a moving vehicle to surprise me like that?"

"Almost," he said with a wry grin.

"Well, is there any chance your family might still be there?"

Nicholas's eyes lit up. "Yes! My dad was going to take me back so I could change and join them on the beach. Come on," Nicholas said, already starting back the way they'd come. "They should be just on the other side of those rocks," he pointed down to where they'd been sitting a few minutes ago.

Elizabeth took his hand to follow him, and turning to look over her shoulder said, "Hattie, when Mom comes back, please tell her I'm with the Strauss family and that I'll find my own way back."

Hattie nodded. "Okay."

Soon Nicholas and Elizabeth were picking their way gingerly across the sharp and slippery rocks which divided the main beach from the mouth of the lagoon.

"So . . ." Nicholas began. "You were going to marry him."

Elizabeth hesitated, pretending to take extra care with the treacherous ground. "Yes," she said simply.

For a while Nicholas didn't know what to say to that. Eventually he asked the question he really wanted to have answered. "May I ask why?"

Elizabeth sighed. "He was a superb actor, Nicholas. He had me fooled. I thought he was someone else."

"Ah." Nicholas didn't know what else to say, but Lizzie did.

"I don't know how I could have been so stupid!"

Nicholas winced at the force of those words, knowing that her anger was borne of feelings which had once been very strong. *They must have been if she'd been willing to marry Charles.* From that, Nicholas knew that he was going to have to take his time winning back Elizabeth's heart. He would have to tread lightly and carefully. After so many betrayals, she would be expecting

him to betray her, too. "Don't be too hard on yourself," Nicholas said as he held her hand to steady her and help her over a particularly treacherous set of rocks.

But she was shaking her head, angry, and not listening to reason. "I don't know, Nicholas. Maybe I'm not being hard enough on myself. How could I have been so blind?"

"We don't expect the people we love to betray us, so we never even see it coming."

Elizabeth looked up at him and smiled sadly. "How did you get to be so wise?"

Nicholas laughed. "I'm not sure if I am Lizzie."

"Maybe you're just a good actor, too?"

Hearing the bitterness in those words, Nicholas stopped Elizabeth in front of him. They stood precariously together on the rounded top of a large, crusty black rock that was slick with salt water. "Hey," he reached up to her face and stroked her cheek. "I'm not going to hurt you, Elizabeth, okay? We've known each other a long time. You *know* me. I'm not a liar."

"I've known my mother a long time too, Nicholas, and she is."

"Well, she *has* lied to you before, a lot, and now you know it."

Elizabeth frowned, trying to remember. "I don't know. . . . I just don't know why she would do that," she said finally.

Nicholas frowned, pulling her towards him, giving her a hug. "Don't worry about it, Lizzie, okay? I'm sure you and your mother can work things out. You both just need to calm down."

"We have to work it out, Nicholas. We're family."

* * *

As nearly as Charles could tell, Elizabeth had made her choice. He was furious. He couldn't believe it! Of all the times Nicholas could have chosen to interfere, now, here in Siesta, had to be the worst! He'd watched as Nicholas and Elizabeth had been reunited on the beach, and then as they'd kissed. It had been all he could do at that point not to run down onto the beach and punch Nicholas in the face. *Get your hands off my fiancée!* he'd wanted to scream. But Elizabeth wasn't his fiancée, not anymore. At that point he had taken the engagement ring out of his pocket again and examined it once more in his palm, turning it over and over, wondering where he'd gone wrong. He'd watched as Nicholas and Elizabeth had walked off together, and he'd followed them for a while, at a distance. He'd been hoping against hope that at some point he'd see Elizabeth send Nicholas off, rejected and alone, but instead he'd seen them walking hand-in-hand, and then he'd seen them sit down together on the rocks by the mouth of the lagoon. At that point, he'd stopped to watch for a few minutes

before he'd turned around to go back to his hotel. Whatever plans Constance had made and whatever repairs she'd made to the damage James had wrought, all of that was lost now. Charles was not a man to just give up without a fight, but for now there was nothing he could do, and he knew it. By now Elizabeth had surely confirmed that James's 'lies' were not lies at all. With that revelation, she would feel twice as betrayed as she had when she'd first learned about it all. No, there was no way to recover from that, and he was smart enough to know it.

Only an hour after he'd checked in to the Wilderness Hotel, Charles was checking out—to the bafflement of the concierge and his own chauffeur. Thomas inquired about the change of plans, but Charles was as silent as a stone. There was no point explaining the whole long, miserable story to his driver, or anyone. It wouldn't reflect well on him if he told the truth, and truth be told, he was tired of lying. No, there was nothing anyone could do to help, or even to make him feel better. Ultimately, he had only himself to blame. *And Nicholas.* Yes, that cad deserved more of the blame. Charles frowned. *And what am I feeling sorry for myself about? There are millions of girls like Elizabeth, and only one of me. I'll find another girl like her in no time, but she'll never find another Charles Atherton.*

Charles smiled ruefully at that. It was true, sad perhaps, but one day she'd see her mistake. Maybe he had been wrong to hide so many things from her, but technically he'd never lied; he'd merely fought a little dirtier than he should have to win her affections. All's fair in love and war, right? It wasn't right for her to put all of that at his feet and call it betrayal. He'd only ever acted out of love for her. If he'd sabotaged Nicholas, it was because he loved her and couldn't bear to share her. Why should he suffer any lesser man competing for her heart? She deserved the best. One day she'd understand all of that, and by then it would be too late. She'd be sorry, but he'd be happy and in love with someone else.

"Sir," Thomas began, interrupting Charles's thoughts as they drove back from the Wilderness. "Shall I take you home to your father, or to your penthouse in Cape Town?"

"Home to my father," Charles said, coming to a decision that was probably long overdue. "He and I have a lot to discuss. I believe I've overstayed my welcome in this bloody country."

"Very well, sir."

* * *

When they finally found Nicholas's family on the beach the reunion was overwhelming. Nicholas's whole immediate family

was there, even his older brother along with his longtime girlfriend, Linda. They all took turns hugging Nicholas and bombarding him with questions. Elizabeth stood to one side, unnoticed and feeling left out for a few seconds until Nicholas turned and re-introduced her to his family. Then all the hugs and questions began anew, this time with her as the center of attention. His family, all except for Johann, were rather surprised to see her.

"How did you two meet again?" Kathleen asked, her eyes flicking from her son to Elizabeth and back again.

Nicholas turned to his father. "Didn't you tell them?"

Johann shook his head and grinned broadly. "I thought you might like to tell everyone yourself. I said you'd met an old friend along the way and you would be here shortly."

Nicholas laughed. "An old friend, huh?"

"Your dad has been very uncooperative," Kathleen said, looking and sounding annoyed. "We had no idea you'd met Elizabeth!"

Johann grinned all the broader and came to pat his son on the back. "*Ja*, he left the truck in a real hurry. I thought he was about to be sick. Then I saw Elizabeth walking on up ahead, and I realized that he was really just lovesick."

"Hopefully you weren't waiting long for me?" Nicholas asked.

Johann began chuckling. "No, when I saw you walking off with her, I decided to leave you two to catch up. You didn't even notice me leaving."

"So?" Kathleen demanded, her hands on her hips. "Neither one of you has explained how this all happened." Kathleen turned to Elizabeth now. "Maybe you'd like to tell us the story, Elizabeth?"

She looked reluctant, so Johann took up the verbal slack, having waited long enough to keep such momentous news to himself. He told the story with great relish, leaving out no details and making sure to embellish a few. Of course he only had the part of the story which he knew, the part which he'd been able to observe as a third party.

Kathleen was shaking her head in awe as they all sat down together on the beach. "Well, that really is *something*!"

Nicholas nodded. "A real coincidence if ever there was one."

Kathleen smiled. "Coincidence is just God's signature."

Nicholas frowned, but decided not to voice any dissenting opinions. He had to admit the circumstances were unusual, but did that make it divine intervention? He really wasn't sure.

"Well," Johann said. "You look hot, Nick. How about I drive you back to Siesta so you can change?"

Nicholas nodded and came to his feet. "*Jinne*, yes that would

be great, Dad, thanks!" He turned to look at Elizabeth. "I'll be back in a minute—unless you want to come with?"

Elizabeth opened her mouth to say something, but before she could, Kathleen reached out and grasped her arm. "No, Nicholas, she and I have a lot of catching up to do. You can have her back when you return."

Elizabeth smiled uncertainly at Kathleen and Nicholas laughed. "Okay, see you all soon."

As Johann drove Nicholas to Siesta, he asked, "So, son, have you given any further thought to becoming a fighter pilot?"

Nicholas hesitated. He *had* given it a lot of thought. The problem was, now he had one very important reason not to go through with it. "I . . ." He hesitated. "I'm not sure anymore."

Johann nodded, smiling to himself, before he spoke.

"A girl can change everything, can't she?"

Nicholas laughed. "In a heartbeat."

"Just remember, whether things work out with Elizabeth or not, if it's worth setting your plans aside for her, then maybe your plans weren't all that good to begin with."

"What do you mean?"

Johann diverted his attention from the road to regard his son. "I mean if becoming a fighter pilot was really the dream you wanted to follow, then the girl of your dreams would be waiting for you somewhere along the same path."

Nicholas frowned. "I'm not sure that's true. Some dreams are mutually exclusive."

"True, but dreams are like stars—"

"—necessary for navigation through life." Nicholas sighed.

Johann chuckled. "So you have been listening to me."

"Yes."

They drove in through the gates of Siesta and pulled up at the Strauss family's campsite. Nicholas hurried to get changed out of his uniform. When he emerged from the camper, he found his father leaning up against the truck and smoking a cigar while he waited. Nicholas approached his dad with a bemused grin. He knew his father smoked cigars on occasion. Until only a few years ago, he'd smoked cigarettes as well.

"What's that about?" Nicholas asked, pointing to the cigar.

"It's a celebratory cigar."

"Oh? What are we celebrating?"

"Your return from the air force, of course. There's another cigar here for you if you'd like to try one."

Nicholas laughed. "Encouraging me to smoke cigars? This is different."

Johann shook his head and puffed out a generous cloud of smoke. "You don't inhale the smoke as you do with a cigarette." Johann took a matching cigar from a package lying on top of the hood of the truck and held it out to Nicholas. "Care to try?"

Nicholas frowned at the cigar for a moment, considering it. Then he remembered how much trouble he'd got into for allegedly smoking at school, and with that memory came the recollection of having to eat almost half a pack of cigarettes. That memory made his stomach churn, and he politely declined the offer. "I had a bad experience with tobacco once."

"Oh?" Johann asked, his bushy eyebrows raised.

Nicholas shook his head and smiled. "Nothing to worry about."

Johann chuckled. "Well, I'm sure there isn't."

They stayed there together, both leaning against the truck while Nicholas waited for his father to finish with his cigar.

"Now, I'm curious," Johann said, puffing out another cloud of fragrant tobacco smoke. "What were Elizabeth's parents' reactions when you met them again?"

Nicholas laughed ruefully. "That's . . . a long story."

"Ya, ek is seker dit is." *Yes, I'm sure it is.* "We've got a minute. I'm listening."

Nicholas sighed and then he began to tell his story, starting with what had happened around Elizabeth's matric farewell, and finishing with the story of what had happened when he'd left for the air force and Elizabeth had tried to catch up with him in Worcester. His father was shocked to hear that he'd gone AWOL to take Elizabeth to her matric farewell, but he was even more shocked to hear how Charles and Constance had conspired to prevent him from taking her to that dance.

"Well, that sure is some story." Johann said shaking his head.

"Yeah," Nicholas snorted. "It definitely is!"

"The course of true love never did run smooth." Johann said.

"Living proof right here," Nicholas said, pointing to his chest.

"And Elizabeth?" Johann asked, pausing to take another drag from his diminishing cigar. "Did she know about any of this?"

"Not until very recently. She was actually engaged to Charles until his driver told her."

Johann whistled. "Engaged, no less. Then what happened when she found out?"

Nicholas shrugged. "About what you'd expect. She broke off the engagement. It seems I owe Charles's driver a debt."

"Yes, it would appear you do."

"Apparently he knows you. His family lives in Sterkspruit. He said you had something to do with helping his family—his wife

and daughter, I think, when they were sick—Typhoid maybe?”

“Oh?” Johann turned with eyebrows raised. “We do live in a small world, don't we? What's his name?”

“James . . . James something. From around Herschel, I think.

Johann frowned. “I recall a lot of James's, but I think I know exactly who you mean. I recall his wife and daughter were so ill that I took them to Empilisweni hospital[‡] myself, rather than wait for an ambulance. They both recovered fully. I'll have to go by his home and thank him for helping you and Lizzie.”

“Yes, I think he's returned the favor. I'll go there with you.”

Johann turned to his son with a smile and patted him on the shoulder. “I thought you might. Come on,” he said, taking a final drag of his cigar and then tossing the butt on the ground and grinding it into the dirt. “Let's get back to the beach. I'm sure you're anxious to see Elizabeth again.”

Nicholas smiled. “You can say that again!”

* * *

Constance was acutely aware that Christmas was only two days away, and that Elizabeth had not anticipated Nicholas's return and thus had no present for him. Without a car, Elizabeth couldn't buy Nicholas a present. “*Good!*” she thought “*I'll make sure it stays that way—let her be embarrassed!*”

Elizabeth had tried to get her dad to take her shopping, but he was under strict orders not to go anywhere till after Christmas. Lizzie would just have to improvise. There was the little store, the Duka, but all it had was basic camping supplies and treats. “Hmmm . . .” she thought, suddenly remembering that tomorrow was Christmas Eve, “What if . . . ?” She had an idea.

[‡] Empilisweni is a Dutch-reform general mission hospital. The real-life Dr. Strauss was, at times, its medical superintendent and resident surgeon in the '60's and 70's, as well as having clinics in the remote mountainous regions of Lesotho and the Transkei.

Chapter 10

Nicholas and Elizabeth were back in the Siestuary, sitting in each other's arms on their favorite grey old bench next to the river, at the meeting of the Serpentine and the Touws river—the railroad bridge visible off to their right.

"Lizzie," Nicholas started to say.

"Yes Nicholas?" Lizzie prompted him.

"Do you remember, perhaps, anything unusual happening the afternoon before your Prom? I mean, over your home and your school?" He asked.

Lizzie felt a jolt suddenly remembering, her eyes flying wide.

"No! Surely not ... was that you?" she inquired as the pieces of the puzzle started falling into place in her mind.

"So you remember a fighter-jet putting on an aerial display over Wellington, centered right above your house and your high school?" Nicholas prompted her.

"I not only remember that, it somehow reminded me of you. I was deeply saddened, thinking about how you'd forgotten about me – that you'd never even written to say goodbye." Lizzie replied.

"Well, I hadn't. I was in that jet and very excited that I'd soon be seeing you again, and, well ..." Nicholas said, choking up as he remembered the heartbreak of what came next.

Elizabeth turned to him, sensing his mood.

"Nicholas, for almost two years now, I've lived my mother's dreams for me – letting her lead me through them, thinking it was the right thing to do – but it turned out that was a bad dream, a nightmare! I've awoken from it – just in time! But better yet, when I wakened, there you were, very real, and my own beautiful dreams – our dreams, could continue." She said, reaching up with her hand to play with the hair over his brows.

Nicholas broke a smile, just about to say something when suddenly, they heard it, the approaching *chuff chuff chuff* of the afternoon train approaching the bridge.

"The train's coming!" Lizzie said excitedly "We should have a nice view of it crossing the bridge from here!"

Just as she finished speaking, the steam engine appeared on the bridge, and the engineer blew its whistle. *Tooooot Tooooot!*

They watched silently as the train crossed . . . remembering.

"Nicholas . . ." Lizzie said, getting his attention.

"Yes, Lizzie?" Nicholas replied, a blissful smile still on his face.

"Tomorrow is Christmas Eve . . . why not let's go and spend the night back at our waterfall again? We still have five wishes left!"

"That's a wonderful idea, Lizzie!" he replied. "Our parents and others in the park are all due to go to their annual Christmas Eve ball at the Holiday Inn again, so we'll be all alone. Why don't we plan to go even earlier - in the afternoon?"

"That would be perfect, Nicholas!" Lizzie said as she snuggled in close to him, her head on his shoulder, her arms around his waist, holding him tight. She didn't want to let go of him—ever! Nicholas was the one person, the years had shown, who she really could depend on. Even with all the obstacles that had been placed in their way, he'd never let her down, while everyone else in her life, had. She had to find a way to tell him at least that.

"How about if, tomorrow, we go and buy some treats at the Duka for our Christmas Eve together?" Nicholas suggested. "My treat—remember the last time you paid."

"Yes," Lizzie replied. "Let's do that."

* * *

"Mom . . ." Lizzie interrupted a clearly stressed Constance, who was busying herself with adjusting her hair, looking in the mirror in preparation for the evening's ball. "I'm going out with Nicholas this afternoon and also tonight."

"Whatever Elizabeth—don't bore me with the childish details of your little summer flings. You're a sophomore now. Act your age!" she replied, irritated, trying to make Elizabeth feel the contempt that was within her—contempt she so richly deserved.

"Fine then, I'll do that." And as she turned to leave, she added, "Don't wait up for me like you did on Christmas Eve two years ago. I'm in good hands - Nicholas actually loves me. I'm perfectly safe with him! I'll see you all early on Christmas morning."

Stupid, stupid girl! Constance fumed. *She'll still see that I'm right, and she'll have to admit that I've always been right!*

* * *

Nicholas steered the canoe under the railway bridge, on their way up the Touws river. This time the train wasn't there yet, but why sit and wait for it? They had a romantic afternoon and evening planned. They'd bought all the supplies together excitedly, almost as if it were their first shopping trip as a young couple. This time they were well prepared, having taken pillows, sleeping bags, a change of clothes, a flashlight, candles, matches, drinks, eats—everything they needed. Lizzie sat in the front of

Cheers, the little blue and white canoe they'd spent so many happy hours in, wearing her pale blue bikini, and her loose cotton shirt. She didn't have to wait long. Nicholas spotted the white lilies on the banks close by, and steered the canoe toward them. He leaned over to pick the best of the bunch, leaving it with a long stem, and handed it to Lizzie. Elizabeth looked radiant, happy and relieved.

"Thank you, Nicholas!" she said, "By now all of the lilies you've picked for me over the years have added up to a beautiful bouquet—have you stopped to think that this is our fourth summer romance in the beautiful Wilderness national park?" she inquired, rubbing the pure white Lily against her cheek and holding her head slightly sideways, smiling mischievously at him.

"Yes, it hasn't escaped my attention," Nicholas began, but just then they heard the train's whistle. Both turned to see it crossing the bridge in the distance. Then it was gone. Nicholas resumed rowing. "And Lizzie, in just a few weeks, we're going to be together at UCT—every day!" he added, smiling happily.

"That's going to be different!" Lizzie replied, "I'd like that—I'd like that a lot!" She added for emphasis, looking very much in love, as she smiled at him, playing with her Cala Lily. She sighed, but it was a very happy sigh. "Nicholas . . ." she started saying, but continued before he replied. "Do you often wonder how it is that we are here, still together, after so many years?" she asked. "Did you or I have the ability to plan our first meeting or plan any subsequent summer romances we've enjoyed together here?"

"I've wondered about it, Lizzie. I'm not exactly sure why, but it does seem rather unusual that we've met again and again at Christmas time, four years out of five now—seemingly against all odds. I mean, who would have thought that you and I would be here, canoeing up the river today, once again?" he added, and before she could reply, he continued, "I mean, really, I think we were both tempted to just simply give up, but it's almost as if we weren't being allowed to. Did you feel that way too Lizzie?" Nicholas asked her, noticing that she was gazing intently at him, turning it all over in her mind.

"Yes, that's exactly what I felt, Nicholas!" she replied "I tried, I really did! It was just too painful to admit to myself that what we had was all a lie—just a dream, not beautiful, unimportant."

"No, Lizzie. What we had was very real—is very real" he corrected himself, "but what others forced on us was a lie."

"I couldn't have said it better myself, Nicholas! Thanks for voicing my inner feelings too," she said, her genuine happiness evident, written in her eyes, and on her face. Do you hear that?"

"Yes Lizzie, that's the sound of our waterfall—it's just around the corner now!" Nicholas announced to Lizzie, excitedly.

Lizzie turned to look, excited, anticipating its appearance. Then suddenly, the canoe rounded the last bend in the river and there ahead of them lay their waterfall. *They were back!*

Nicholas steered the canoe into the center of the river, turning it sideways. They just sat there staring at it for a moment.

Elizabeth was the first to speak. "Nicholas . . ." she said "When last we were here, we were just leaving our childhood behind us. Back then ours was a sweet and innocent childhood romance—passionate, yes, but innocent. Now you're a man, you've been in two wars. I've long since finished high school, and now my freshman year at UCT. I'm a sophomore this year. I was a year behind you, but now I'm a year ahead. Things are different now, I know that, but I'm not yet willing to make the transition from innocent love to passionate, steamy, lusty romance—exciting as I expect that may be. Do you still feel the same? Have you changed . . . umm, in that way? I mean are you still . . ."

Nicholas, sensing her discomfort, but knowing what she was asking him, interrupted her. "It's okay, Lizzie. You know we've always confided in each other—we've talked freely about these matters. Yes, I'm still a virgin, though as a man, that's hardly considered a bragging point nowadays, especially at my age and in the military, but that doesn't bother me. I've waited patiently, I can still wait longer - I know it's important to you too."

"Good! I'm really glad to hear that, Nicholas, because that means you've never committed to anyone else, at least not any more than you have ever done to me. That means I still have the edge," she said, smiling coyly at him "I mean, we have a history, you and I—and barring that level of intimacy, it's a history that's impossible to match, for either of us, with anyone else!"

Nicholas laughed—a relieved, nervous little laugh, "But Lizzie, I've made my confession to you, so now, how about yours?" he inquired, looking nervous, hoping . . . but she interrupted him.

"The short answer to that is that I'm still a virgin, Nicholas." She looked up at him, noticing the puzzled look on his face.

"And the long answer, Lizzie?" He asked, wincing as he did.

"Well, the long answer is that Charles is not as principled as you in that regard. He kind of thinks that since he's so rich, I should have let him do whatever he wanted to with me." Then she continued, "And when I suggested that we should rather wait, he got very irritated with me, saying that I cannot expect that of him, that he's a man and that it's natural at our ages to be . . . well, to give into our lusts and passions."

"Sounds like he really respected your values, Lizzie!" Nicholas said sarcastically. "How did you handle that? What did you do?"

"I simply slapped his hands—a lot, and let him sulk. He always got over it. Apparently other women had not done that with him, ever, even older women, it seems, so things were a little testy at times. But to his credit, he never physically forced me; he just played mental games with me, applying all sorts of pressure, and champagne, but I had a trick up my sleeve. Whenever things were getting out of hand, I softly whispered our secret word to myself, and as I thought of you, the moment passed," she said, giggling.

Nicholas laughed. "Well, at least he understood that a women's *no*—means *no*," Nicholas added, relieved, riding the canoe up onto the little sandy beach at the side of the waterfall's pool.

"Yes, at least he did back off when I insisted." Apparently men don't always do that. I'm glad he did though," Lizzie added.

Then as they got out and stood there, stretching themselves, Nicholas went over to Lizzie, taking her into his arms, and then he kissed her. She responded, willingly, tenderly, to his advances. *It feels so good to have Lizzie back in my arms again*, he thought.

It feels so good to be back in his strong loving arms again, she thought. She felt her legs weakening under her. "Waterfall" she whispered softly into his ear, her hot breath sending shivers down his spine. He laughed, and she laughed, too. They stood there, holding each other. Their summer romance was back on track! Elizabeth broke away, her arms still draped loosely over his shoulders, her hands clasped loosely behind his head, as she looked up into his eyes. "I think I'd have forgiven you, if you'd have answered differently, Nicholas . . . I mean, given all of the circumstances, I'm surprise that you're even here in my arms!"

Nicholas looked deeply into her eyes, seeing genuine love and gratitude streaming out of them. "I love you Elizabeth—I always have, and I always will, and I'll never hide that fact again! Not from you, or anyone else! I hope you don't mind that? My heart's now fully out on my sleeve, and I'm completely at your mercy. What happens next, I really don't know, but I want you to know at least that . . ." Lizzie placed a finger on Nicholas's lips to stop him from saying anything more. "That's exactly what I'd hoped to hear tonight, Nicholas. You don't have to spoil it by saying anything more, and now I want you to know this—"

Nicholas held her gaze, relieved that he had not scared her off, hoping that she felt similarly about him, hoping that she'd say at least some of those same things to him.

"When I took you to confront my mother about her lies, that day we met again next to the beach, I said some things to her

about us . . . do you remember them?" she asked Nicholas.

"Well, kind of? But it was rather stressful, so no—not exactly everything," he said, wondering where she was going with this.

"But I was fully in control, Nicholas. Perhaps for the first time in my life, and with you there by my side, I chose my words carefully. Let me remind you of them now," she said. "I told her that I've made my choice—despite her best attempts to interfere, that I know what I want, and *who* I want. I told her that she can either accept that or not; that it's now entirely up to her, and I'll not be swayed by her!" Lizzie paused, "Remember?"

"Yes." Nicholas said, "That's part's tough to forget!" he added.

"Well then, in case you didn't pick up on what I was saying to you, right then and there, in her presence—I'll reiterate it," Lizzie said, smiling lovingly into his eyes. "Nicholas Strauss, I love you! Deep down I've always known that. It's just that I needed to choose, to be forced to choose, and now I have, and I choose you! Please don't ever disappoint me. You're the only one who hasn't. Please love me for the rest of my life. I'd really like that—I'd welcome that! I want no one else's love but yours, Nicholas! Do you understand?" Lizzie asked, her eyes now moist, her lips trembling from the passion of her words.

Nicholas was speechless, reeling under the sheer weight of her words. He wasn't quite expecting that much candor - that much passion from her, so without the right words to add to hers, he took her head gently in his hands, and as her eyes fluttered closed, he kissed her. It was the most mutually warm, gentle, loving kiss they'd ever shared! As he kissed her, he was aware of her tears spilling over onto their lips, finding entry into their mouths. He tasted her tears. She did too. Their saltiness added a certain poignancy and validity to her words—that words alone simply could not convey. After a while, he paused, looking into her eyes, using his thumbs to gently wipe away the tears still evident in the outside corners of her eyes, and then he spoke.

"Lizzie, I believe you, not just because I want to—and Lord knows that I do! But I believe you because I know you well enough. I've known you for five years now. I've enjoyed four glorious summers with you—four beautiful summer romances."

Lizzie looked as if she were about to speak, but he placed his finger on her lips, and she acquiesced, allowing him to rather continue. "With you, I've endured the wildest roller coaster ride imaginable, but Lizzie, you've been on that ride with me. I can't imagine it was any easier for you." He paused, his finger still gently resting on her lips, then he continued, "You're fiery, jealous, passionate, funny, loving, kind, but above all—you're also

truthful, and though you've withheld information from me, at times out of need, and I understand that much, you've never, ever outright lied to me. Elizabeth, I know you're a woman of integrity. So I believe you! Now what are we going to do about it? What comes next for us? Where do we go from here?"

And with that, he removed his finger from her lips, placing the ball squarely back into her court. She looked fully satisfied—a warm feeling flooded throughout her body, starting in her chest, spreading out to her face and head. It seemed to be radiating to every corner of her being, even down to her toes. She looked up at Nicholas, her face still flushed, her eyes now dry, and replied, "Good . . . I'm glad you believe me. You should! Now let's spend the rest of tonight discussing what comes next, shall we?"

Nicholas took that as his cue, and started removing the items from the canoe, placing them on the sand in front of the big rock. Lizzie helped him. The most important part of what she had to say and hear was done, to her full satisfaction, and she relaxed. Together they now excitedly chattered away as they made their camp site ready for the Christmas Eve that lay ahead. Then Lizzie stood up, pulled her shirt over her head, and headed straight into the pool, looking back over her shoulders as she did so, with a mischievous smile, saying, "Last one in the pool is . . . well, the last one in!" she added, laughing, then dove into the pool. She surfaced, turning to look at him, smoothing her hair back, getting rid of the excess water on her face. "So, what's taking you so long?" she asked, teasing him, then with her arms out of the water, her open hands outstretched, she beckoned to him "Come to me, sir Ian. Your Lady Jennifer awaits you again, in her pool."

Nicholas didn't need a second invitation. Without fanfare, he pulled his shirt over his head, walking into the pool until it became too deep, then he swam over to her. "I'm back!" he said. Together they swam and laughed and played in their pool, all alone there in their Wilderness. Life was perfect. Happiness had returned. The future looked bright, full of hope, filled with love. As they sat, basking in the sun, on the rocks by the side of the waterfall, leaning back on their hands, Lizzie and Nicholas finally were able to fill in the blanks. They opened up about everything that had happened in their lives in the time when they were apart. It was all behind them now. They were back together again.

"Lizzie, do you remember how we play-acted out our feelings, on Christmas Eve, two years ago, right here? Then adding, "I guess you must have, as you used our stage names just now."

"Oh yes, that was tough to forget! All those memories kept coming back into my mind even though I tried to banish any

thoughts of them, or you, to deal with my hurt,” She replied.

Nicholas continued, “What I’m really trying to say, is that back then I couldn’t quite bring myself to be honest with you about how I felt . . . I mean, using the flowery words you told me you would have liked to hear. But I was scared to lose you, thinking that maybe you’d not feel the same way about me,” Nicholas said, wanting to go on, but before he could, Lizzie interrupted him.

“I know, Nicholas. I played along with you, knowing that under the safety of your ruse, I’d find out everything my heart desired and my mind needed not know,” Elizabeth said, with a wink.

“What do you mean, Lizzie?” Nicholas asked, looking puzzled.

“I mean that at some point in your play, Mr. Director, I took over the lead from you, interviewing you about everything near and dear to my heart—past, present and future,” she smiled.

“That’s sneaky!” Nicholas laughed, bumping shoulders with her. “Did I answer all your questions satisfactorily?” he asked.

“Why yes, Sir Ian—you did! So much so that Charles could not ever measure up to you all the time you were gone, even though I thought I’d never see you again! That was a tough act to follow,” Lizzie said with a giggle, bumping her shoulder against his this time. “I knew, at that moment, I had you entranced – at a distinct disadvantage. It was opportunistic of me, but the opportunity of a lifetime had just presented itself, and so I made good use of it!”

Nicholas smiled; wanting to hear more, so he let her continue.

“It’s as if you were on truth serum that day, right here, Nicholas. I got to ask you anything—about everything, and you told me almost all that I needed to know. Charles never did. He was always just an act, a smooth, classy act, mind you, but he never gave into my feminine wiles. He never allowed himself to be totally entranced by me—he always thought it should be the other way around. I didn’t think that was right. It felt as if I was his prize, but in the end, I just felt like his prize idiot. What a narrow escape I had! Thanks for coming to my rescue, Sir Ian. I may have made the biggest mistake of my life if you hadn’t believed in me and tried - yet again. I was so glad to see you! When you ran up behind me, placing your arms around me, you reopened options that I thought were long since lost to me, forever.” Lizzie reached over and kissed him on his cheek. “Thanks, Nicholas,” then looking up, she said, “and thank you, God! I know my prayers were answered—that my anguish was being seen in Heaven!”

“I’d asked God to keep you safe, Nicholas. If not for me, at least for someone else who’d love you as you deserve to be loved.”

Nicholas, feeling the depths of her emotions once more, turned to look at her, breathing out slowly, and then said, “Lizzie, our

nightmare is over, the worst is behind us. I know instinctively that what you've concluded about Heaven's help for us, is correct, though I'm not seeing it as clearly as you do, yet. But I do feel we've passed some huge, important test, because that's what it really was!" And with that, he leaned over, playing with her hair, kissed her forehead, her head, her cheeks, her lips, her neck, and her ears—then whispered into them. "I'm thankful to God too, Lizzie, for I cannot imagine what life would be like without you."



*Lizzie and Nicholas in their “**Secret place**” (Painting by Jonathon)*

Chapter 10

Constance was enjoying the sumptuous feast before her. Next to her sat Edwin, and across from her sat Kathleen Strauss, and across from him sat Dr. Johann Strauss. They'd finished with the first round of dancing, and dinner was now being served. The waiters had filled their glasses with champagne and all round them people chatted about their lives. Constance took great pleasure in telling everyone about her big fancy home, her husband's Mercedes, his fancy title, her red MG convertible sports car, their powerboat and his BMW 750cc motorcycle. She recounted how, when they were young, a motorcycle was all he had, and how her father had forbidden her to marry Edwin when he'd taken her home on it to ask her father's permission to marry her - but she did so anyway.

Kathleen humored her. Johann had heard enough, and said "You're forgetting one thing; it's probably the most important!"

Constance looked confused. "I did?" she inquired curiously.

"Yes," Johann continued, "Your little blue and white canoe, *Cheers*—my son and your daughter fell in love in it many years ago, and he always picked her a long-stem white Arum lily each time they canoed up the river. Heck, they're probably out enjoying each other's company in it right now as we speak!"

Constance swallowed hard—trying to prevent herself from choking, but it was too late. She coughed and spluttered. Edwin slapped her on the back—a bit too hard! She reached for her glass of water, but only managed to knock it over, then she twisted around in her seat to admonish Edwin "Not so hard you . . . you, you're hurting me!" she hissed at him. Johann looked on, bemused, sipping his champagne. Kathleen looked concerned, but he reached down and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. Johann was a doctor, so if he wasn't concerned, she could probably relax. Constance would be ok.

"I could have choked to death!" Constance angrily glared at Johann. "Anyway, who cares about a stupid little canoe and my daughter's silly summer dalliances!" she hissed. "And as for those ghoulish lilies your son gives her—they're terribly unlucky!"

"Connie . . ." she grimaced hearing him call her that. "You're

forgetting I'm a doctor, and a surgeon!" he said, then picking up the steak knife beside his plate, he held it up for all to see, twirling it around a bit for effect. "I could easily have performed an emergency tracheotomy on you, if the situation warranted it, but I was monitoring you, and as you can see, it turned out fine." Then he reached for his champagne glass, and lifting it high, he said, "Before I forget, let's drink to the happy young couple—a couple clearly very much in love! I dare say they don't think of *Cheers* as a silly little canoe. It's always been their very own love boat, and as for their favorite white Calla lily, I predict it's only going to be unlucky for those that are stupid enough to oppose their obvious love for each other ... true love! So here's to the young couple, their lily, the canoe and their young love!" And with that they all drank from their champagne glasses—all except Constance.

"What's wrong, Constance? Not fond of champagne anymore?" Johann remarked, pressing home the advantage. Edwin, already rather inebriated, just sat there with a silly grin on his face. Kathleen grew uncomfortable, but thought it best not to interrupt Johann. Constance drew her lips into a thin line.

"Well I disagree with you on all of that. Lizzie is still a child, an immature young girl who does not know what she wants or what is good for her. She's not 21 yet, and I'll be the one to set her straight on all matters—including advising her to outgrow her idealistic, silly romantic notions. You may as well warn your son off, as no good can come of it for him or your family. She'll break his heart—I know she will. She has a fiancé back home, one who is very wealthy, an English gentleman who can show her the world, and then give it to her. Nicholas cannot compete with all of that," she said, with emphasis. "So if we're to drink to anything here tonight, let's drink to Elizabeth and Charles's upcoming wedding!" and with that, she lifted her glass to her lips. Everyone else just sat there watching her drink her champagne. Nobody lifted their glass - not even Edwin.

Johann waited patiently till she'd set her glass down, and then with a glint in his eye, he said to her, "Care to bet?" and without waiting for her reply, he raised his glass in one more toast. "So why don't we drink to young love and agree to all mind our own business and give it every chance it needs to flourish and grow? Then, whatever the outcome, we agree to all accept it and be happy for the young couple, and rally around them, whether that's Elizabeth and Nicholas, or Elizabeth and Charles—or Elizabeth and somebody else," he said.

"Hear—*hic*—hear," Edwin piped up. "Well said, Johann!" and

with that, they all were forced into raising their glasses in a toast – but Constance refrained from drinking.

Constance glared at Edwin, and then excused herself from the table—presumably to go to the ladies’ restroom. As she left, they heard her say under her voice, “Insufferable man!”

Edwin hiccupped, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, took another swig of his champagne, and then giggled, saying, “Johann, that was probably meant for you - or me, or men in general. I’m not really sure. She’s a strong feminist, you know—doesn’t much care for any of us men, looks down her nose at us, she does. Likes to say that she and her kind will one day rule the world!” Edwin, leaned forward, spilling some champagne down the front of his glass, hurrying to wipe it and his mouth again. Johann smiled. Edwin was drunk—*In Vino Veritas*, he thought. He lifted his glass in a toast, encouraging Edwin to drink yet more. “Well, Eddie, if she and her kind ever do get to rule the world, we’d sure be in a lot of trouble. I dare say you’d never get to enjoy another beer ever again—or another round of golf!”

Kathleen laughed, seeing the humor in that “That will be the day!” she said, shooting her husband a concerned look. He leaned over and whispered in her ear. “Relax, Kate. Edwin’s finally loosening up a bit. It’s about the only time he’s not saying *yes, dear— whatever you say dear ...* tonight should be fun!”

Johann sat back, amused.

Edwin drank another mouthful of champagne, emptying it, then held it up and slurred. “Waiter—*hic*—fill ‘er up!”

The waiter came by refilling all their glasses. Kathleen winced. She excused herself. *This is going to be a long evening*, she thought, as she passed Constance on her way back to the table.

Johann and Constance were like oil and water, but she knew, from experience, that oil usually always stayed on top of water. She shuddered involuntarily. *What has Nicholas got himself into?* Constance clearly did not want him as part of her family—she had her sights set on Charles, and she clearly thought that it was her legitimate duty to make that choice for Elizabeth! What did the future hold for Nicholas? What did it hold for them all?

Chapter 10

Nicholas and Lizzie dove into the pool, swimming up to and then under the waterfall's edge, enjoying a refreshing shower there, then out into the pool one last time, enjoying the last bit of warmth of the sun just before it started setting. Then they swam back to their little beach, surrounded by the jungles' trees. They stood there, drying themselves off. Lizzie towel-dried her hair as best she could, then started to comb her long hair, untangling it. She turned to pick up a packet, and then spoke to Nicholas.

"Nicholas, please be a gentleman and turn around, will you. I need to get out of my wet bikini and into dry clothes."

Nicholas did as he was asked, turning around to look at the barely moving river - its mirrored surface disappeared round a corner, into the jungle, then on its way to the sea. Being dammed up where it would normally enter the sea, for the holiday season, and constantly topped up by the waterfall, the river formed a huge estuary, great for powerboats, water-skiing and holiday fun and it allowed them to visit their favorite place by canoe.

He heard Lizzie taking clothes out of the packet, and tried to imagine what she was going to be wearing. When she finally gave him permission, he turned around to find her standing there in blue jeans, a soft cotton shirt, and a waist-length brown bomber jacket, unzipped for now. Her bikini hung drying over a nearby branch, along with her towel.

"Wow, Lizzie—you look gorgeous!" He said appreciatively. "If you don't mind, I'm just going to dry off and slip my jeans over my costume later," he said, putting on his favorite black tee-shirt.

"That's fine," she said, sitting down. I'm just covering up for the night and the mosquitoes, though I recall, from our last time here, there weren't too many. Come sit down next to me on the sand," she beckoned to him, patting the empty place beside her.

Nicholas went and sat down next to her. "Hungry?" she asked.

"Famished!" he replied. "It's all the fresh air and cold water."

Lizzie handed him a packet of potato chips, and a can of soda.

Then she took one of each for herself too. They sat there in that narrow treed valley, watching the setting sun with its red hues spreading over the sky, forming a canopy above them. Its brilliant

colors reflected in the mirrored surface of the pool.

Lizzie spoke first. "Our parents should be having sundowners overlooking the ocean, on the patio of the Holiday Inn—more or less right now. We've yet to go back there. Wonder if Corey is still working the bar there? I bumped into him at UCT, and he said he would be back this year. We should go and say hi, sometime, Nicholas. Will you take me back there soon?" she asked.

"Of course I will, Lizzie! It will bring a measure of closure to these lonely years for us, as it was there, two Christmases ago, that I first realized how tough these last two years were going to be for us. You didn't notice, but Corey brought it to mind when he reminded you, and me, that you were going to be a freshman at UCT, and with your looks, a very popular one—without me anywhere in sight; then he reminded me how helpless I would be to try and court you whilst I was stuck in the military. It was also there that you asked me to take you to this beautiful place for Christmas Eve, remember? I didn't know what you had planned—it came as a complete surprise to me, a really nice surprise! Back then, it was the best Christmas Eve of my life, and it was also when we used up our first two wishes. You haven't told anyone what we wished for, have you?" Nicholas said as an afterthought.

"No, it's still our little secret! And remember to do the same! We can only ever talk about our wishes when and if they come true, or never if they don't, because they still may, and I hope they do!" Lizzie replied, adding, "And tonight we get to do it all again—except that I get to stay out till 2am - or 3am in the morning, legitimately now, because I'm a college girl, a sophomore. You're just about to become a freshman," she teased, rubbing shoulders with him, so when we're in UCT together in a few weeks time, you'll be dating a girl already in second year," Lizzie said smiling.

"That's not quite right. I'll be dating a beautiful young woman, a sophomore named Elizabeth. You're no longer a girl, Lizzie."

Elizabeth blushed. It was nice to be thought of as a woman, though her mother didn't think so. "Thanks, Nicholas," she said.

"So what are we going to do, being there with each other every day? Nicholas asked. "How are we going to handle that?"

Lizzie looked up at him, and smiled warmly "We're going to take time out each and every day to be with each other, between lectures, homework and sleep. Go for walks, sit and chat in the many parks, go for meals at the many student restaurants close by our residences, and go for drives along the sea in your old car—if you bring it with you," Lizzie replied.

"I'll have to, but it's as old as me now. It's hardly a chauffeur-driven Mercedes!" he said, winking at her.

"It doesn't matter to me Nicholas. You know that, as long as it's you and I together in it—and no other girl!" Lizzie replied.

Nicholas laughed. "Lizzie, c'mon, you know that's not going to happen. By the way, I'm invited to Denise's sister's wedding in late January, and it's being held at a hotel a few hundred yards from Tugwell hall—your residence! I'm one of the groomsmen and naturally Denise will be a bridesmaid. Maybe you'll get to meet the whole family when they're there?" Nicholas suggested.

Lizzie looked decidedly uncomfortable. "You mean, I get to meet the beautiful, young blonde girl whose boyfriend I stole and whose heartache is on my conscience?" Lizzie said, "That's kind of awkward, don't you think?"

"Actually, I think you'll be very surprised. She's a classy young lady, and she's always insisted that I try and make things work out with you first. Then only if it didn't—then maybe she and I should explore our own futures, together," Nicholas replied.

"That was mighty noble of her, Nicholas. To be honest, I'd not be able to do the same thing." Yes, maybe one day I'd like to meet her, if only to thank her in person for helping you, and for helping us get this far," Elizabeth said. "But maybe alone?" She added.

"Let's just see how things work out. They're all down in Cape Town now—all three sisters. And Denise is starting at UCT too. It's going to be, well let's just say, interesting. But bear in mind, these are all my childhood friends, and really think back to your childhood friends. They're kind of important to you, aren't they?" Nicholas asked, trying to soothe Lizzie's nerves.

"Perhaps," Lizzie replied. "Have you thought what you'll study at UCT?" she asked, changing to a more neutral topic.

"Yes, I'd like to do a computer science degree," he replied.

"Hmmm . . . sounds intriguing," Lizzie replied. "Tough too!"

"I don't know yet—I guess I'll soon find out, it's all so new. They're even saying that someday people will be able to afford their own computers for their homes!" Nicholas added.

Lizzie and Nicholas suddenly noticed how dark it had become.

Nicholas got up, unrolled one of the sleeping bags, unzipped it so that it was double-wide, lay it down carefully on the sand in front of the rock, facing the pool, and placed their two pillows on it. Then he lit the two large citronella candles, placing one on the rock above their heads, and another at the bottom of the sleeping bag, wedging it into the sand, off to the side to protect Lizzie. He took his jeans out of the bag, and slipped them over his costume, which was now dry, and lay down on his back, facing the night sky, inviting Lizzie to join him there.

"It's beautiful, Nicholas—I'll never get tired of it!" she said.

“Yes, Lizzie, neither will I! Look, the first few stars are coming out already. I think this time we are going to have a half-moon[§] based on last night’s moon—unlike our first Christmas Eve here two years ago, which was inky-black! Remember! It made for a tricky canoe trip back after midnight!” Nicholas remarked.

“Yes, and we got into a lot of trouble then, too!” Lizzie replied.

“The worst Christmas day of my life!” Nicholas added. “I had to spend it without you, but technically not all of it. The two hours after midnight we spent together were, well, *magical*, is one word that comes to mind—unforgettable is another!”

Lizzie laughed “We’ll do it again tonight - canoeing by candle light. Maybe this time we’ll play some Christmas music too?”

“Good idea!” Nicholas replied. “Lizzie, do you want to know what my wish would have been two years ago—I mean, if I could have said it out loud, letting you hear it?” Nicholas asked her.

“Nicholas, you’ve noticed I’m a woman, right? And you may have heard that we’re kind of an inquisitive sex, right? So that question’s a bit redundant. Yes, go ahead, tell me,” Lizzie said.

“You make a good point, but I’m still glad you want to know. Two years ago, my wish was similar to yours, but it was supposed to be like this—” Nicholas recited his wish again, but this time with his intended words, “*Star light, star bright, the first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight ... that one day I may get to live in a place like this, and lie there every night, with my you Lizzie, my true love, in my arms—both of us with a love that’s forever right!*”

Lizzie didn’t laugh. Instead she moved her mouth up to his ear, nibbling playfully at it, her hot breath feeling moist on his ear, her breathing shallow and fast, as she whispered, “That’s amazingly similar to what I wanted to say, but I also didn’t.”

Nicholas was surprised—he hadn’t been expecting to hear that! He grew bold at Lizzie’s confession. “Lizzie, do you think we could do a bit of play-acting here again tonight?” Nicholas suggested.

“I suppose, as long as it’s done by the same rules as last time, so that if we do say something wrong, we both understand that we’re on-stage, so as to say, and just practicing for real life.”

“Ok then, how about this. We’re Lady Jennifer and Sir Ian again, just like two years ago. I mean, we know who they are, where they come from and what their feelings for each other are. But this time, Sir Ian has to propose to Lady Jennifer, and she

[§] December 24th, 1975 was indeed a half moon in the southern hemisphere, and quite bright - unlike 24th December 1973, when Lizzie and Nicholas were last together at their pool and waterfall - that night there was a new moon, and so it was totally dark.

has to listen to his proposal, weigh it up carefully, and then act accordingly. Would you be up for that?" Nicholas asked.

"Yes, I would, Elizabeth said, but in the spirit of equality in acting, what if after that I kind of, well, play the part of Lady Jennifer eliciting an even better more detailed proposal from Sir Ian, instead of just simply saying Yes or No—I mean, we're only acting here, right?" Elizabeth suggested, hugging him.

"Ok, I'm in agreement with that, it could be rather fun, I mean this would qualify as a Mid-Summer Night's Dream for both of us—do you remember that play from high school?" he asked.

"Kind of," Lizzie said, "but I've got something else in mind. Nicholas, go ahead and get yourself ready to commence acting."

Nicholas thought for a while, and then he spoke. "Lizzie, I want you to sit upright, on your knees, leaning back on your legs here on the sleeping bag, but near the candle so we can see each other. I'm going to do the same and sit on my haunches facing you. It's summer, and Lady Jennifer has returned to her pool as she's always did, waiting for her true love to come back from the wars in France. Miraculously her mother is no longer an obstacle to their love, no details provided as to why—but it's our dream, so let's just assume that much. Now it's time for Sir Ian to convince Lady Jennifer to marry him. Are you ready?"

Lizzie sprang into action, adopting her position as requested. Nicholas moved in front of her, taking both of her hands in his, cleared his throat, and looked up into her eyes, the flickering candle light illuminating her face, her body and the nearby surroundings, as he began his play-acting.

"Lady Jennifer, my love, my splendid lady, I'm overjoyed to hear that your mother has finally conceded that you are free to choose who to give your heart to. You know I love you, Lady Jennifer. I always have, from the very first day I laid eyes upon you, here, right in this very pool. I will waste no time in pleading my case—that you should consent to be my wife. I've loved you steadfastly, from the very beginning, and only you. I've foresworn all others, and in wartime, that's quite a feat! I've been loyal to you. I've fallen asleep, each night, dreaming about you—about when we will be together again, and in my sleep, I've often dreamed that we're together, forever, living beside this beautiful pool. But I awake each morning to find that it's only a dream, and my heart aches with loneliness and despair. The pain is unbearable, Lady Jennifer—even for me, a brave, battle-hardened knight. I yearn to be with you always, so please Lady Jennifer, please consent to be my wife. If you will say yes, I promise, I will no longer ride into battle on my trusty steed, but will take up an

honorable profession to be with you each and every day. I will provide for you, take care of you, and love you. Please, Lady Jennifer say 'yes'—but if you don't, please say 'maybe'—so that you leave me with some small hope, else I'm not sure I can go on living - with such a completely broken heart."

Lizzie smiled at him, and then squeezed his hands. "Before I give my answer, my lord, May I ask you a few simple questions?"

"Yes, Lady Jennifer, you may, and I pray that I answer them all to your satisfaction," Nicholas replied.

"Well, you'll have no choice but to answer them truthfully, my lord, since I have with me tonight, a potion, locked up in this rams horn that you must first drink."

As she said that, she turned to retrieve her half-empty can of Mountain Dew, then holding it in both her cupped hands, she offered it to him saying, "Here it is, my lord, drink of this potion, and listen carefully to my questions." Nicholas took the make believe horn of truth-potion, and lifting it to his mouth, he drained it all in several thirsty gulps. Then he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, handing the can back to Lizzie.

"My lord!" Lady Jennifer exclaimed. One sip was to be enough—you've taken an overdose! I fear you may be too truthful in your confessions here tonight!" she gently rebuked him.

"I have a strange new feeling coming over me, Lady Jennifer," Nicholas said, rubbing his stomach and groaning. I have a fullness bubbling up inside of me, wanting to come out, perhaps it's all of the truths that have been lying in wait within me, for so long, for just such an occasion—these many years of our love?"

"Oh my lord, it's probably just gas, but hold that thought!" she said, winking at him, "May I proceed?"

"Yes, you may, Lady Jennifer. I'm ready to answer all of your questions honestly—I really have no choice now. I'm overflowing with the truth potion, remember?"

"Very well, my lord. I shall need to stand up to ask you these questions, but you may remain kneeling before me," Lizzie said, as she arose, moving back a few feet, but still visible in the flickering candle light, though somewhat dimly. "And may I ask, my lord, that you reply only to my questions, in the affirmative, or the negative—as your heart and your head lead you, telling me only the truth?" she instructed him.

"Yes, I will, Lady Jennifer. You may proceed," Nicholas replied.

"Very well then, my lord . . . watch carefully and wait for my questions to finish first before answering," Lizzie reiterated.

"First, my lord, do you promise here before me tonight, and before God in Heaven, to answer truthfully all of my questions."

"Lady Jennifer, you know I've consumed all of thy truth potion. The horn is empty," He assured her, pointing to the empty can.

"Nevertheless, I want you to promise the same before God and me!" she insisted, looking beguilingly at Nicholas.

Nicholas felt a bit uncomfortable with her suggestion—*you cannot play-act with God involved!* He knew that much and he was pretty sure Lizzie did too! This was an ingenious trap, and he'd allowed Lizzie to walk him right into it. Now this acting was no longer acting—it was all very real! *"If she wants the truth, I'll answer as truthfully in this play as I would in real life", he thought.* So he replied, "Yes, milady, I do so promise, before God and you!"

"Good!" she said, "Now if you don't mind, I need to change into my costume for tonight's performance, so can you please turn and lie with your face in the pillow until I tell you to look up?"

"Sure," Nicholas replied, though he was at a loss to think what she meant—she was already in her dry clothes she brought. The only others were her bikini and thin cheese-cloth shirt, now dry, but still hanging on the branch above them.

Lizzie got up. He heard the sound of clothing being taken off, then put on and adjusted. He was burning up with curiosity.

"I'm done. You can look now, my lord," Lizzie announced.

Nicholas turned to look at her, and then he did a double take! "Lady Jennifer, you've blown out the candles. I can barely make out your silhouette in the moonlight, standing there, it appears—naked, up to your hips in the dark pool?" he said, most surprised.

"Don't judge a book by its cover, my lord" She laughed. "Please could you go ahead and light the candles again?"

Nicholas did as she asked, first the candle behind him, then the one closest to her. Blowing out the match he looked, seeing Elizabeth undressed, but struggled to make out any finer details. "Why, Lady Jennifer, you are naked! Maybe for skinny-dipping?" Nicholas remarked, now very titillated, but also clearly puzzled!

Lizzie paused, standing there before him, the half moon now illuminating her, the hills and trees, shimmering off the mirrored surface of the pool. The light from the candles brought her into sharper focus, then dimmed, placing her back into the shadows, as they flickered. She ran her open hands slowly over the front of her breasts, down the sides, to her waist. Then, lifting her arms, beckoning towards him with her upturned palms, she asked him "My lord, do you like what you see? Do you approve of me?"

"Why yes, Lady Jennifer—that I certainly do!" He replied.

Lizzie looked pleased. She stood there, in the moonlight, her hands twirling and playing with the strands of her long, chestnut brown hair, and playfully placed some hair in her mouth and

tilting her head gently sideways, she now smiled, coyly, at him.

“And now my lord ... do you still approve of me?” she inquired.

“Yes, Lady Jennifer, I really do — I approve of you!” he replied.

Then with a flourish and a flick of her hands, she deftly threw her long hair backwards over her shoulders, smoothing it into place, so it hung loose in the center of her back, in the process, pushing her chest forwards, pointing her perky bare breasts towards him.

“And now my Lord, do you still approve of me?” she asked.

Nicholas was having great difficulty believing his eyes! Lizzie now stood before him there, in the moonlight, a beautiful maiden, bare from the waist up, the rest of her still safely hidden by the waters of their pool, with her perfectly perky, round, well-shaped breasts well above the water-line. Flickering candle light, coupled with the distance to her, made it difficult for him to make out the finer details, but there was no doubt he was seeing great beauty!

“Yes, Lady Jennifer, I approve, I really, really do!” he replied.

Then Lizzie took her hair back over her shoulders and held it up in her upturned hands, showing it to him, and now she asked

“And, my lord, when my soft, flowing mane—my pride, turns grey with age, will you still approve of me, will you still love me?” she asked, now sounding deadly serious - no longer playful, at all!

Nicholas looked up at her, standing there before him. This was Lizzie asking him ... this wasn't Lady Jennifer talking any longer!

“Yes, dearest Lady, I'll still love you,” he replied. “I surely will!”

Lizzie flicked her hair back over her shoulders, rearranging it with her hands, and then moved her upturned, open hands to gently cup her perky breasts, supporting them from underneath.

“And, my lord, when these breasts grow older and sag, will you still approve of me then? Will you still love me then?” she asked.

Nicholas swallowed past the lump forming in his throat. “Yes, my dearest Lady, I will still love thee then, I promise!” he replied.

Sensing he was now quite flustered, she hesitated briefly - then decided to press on. She moved her hands to her bare stomach, using her open hands to cover it, and now more gently asked him.

“And, my lord, when childbirth and age take their toll, and my middle is not so flat and firm any more, but rounded, fuller and soft, will you still approve of me? Will you love me, even then?”

Nicholas was pretty stunned! Lizzie had him exactly where she wanted him, and he had no choice; he had to be totally truthful!

“Yes, my dearest one, I will still approve of thee and love thee,” he replied, now, disoriented, quite stunned by her brazenness.

Lizzie smiled. She was almost done getting her answers. She moved slowly out of the water, her hands moving down, over her hips and onto her naked thighs before asking her final question.

“And, my lord, when age takes its toll and my hips are more rounded, my thighs not quite so smooth or well formed, will you still approve of me then? Will you still love me then-and only me?”

Nicholas was shell-shocked. He’d promised before God to tell the truth, the Mountain Dew really didn’t count for anything now! “Yes, my dearest lady, I will still approve of you and I will still love thee –and only thee!” he replied, not knowing what to expect next.

Lizzie slowly removed her hands, then turning, walked back into the pool till it’s waters covered her nakedness, to just above her nipples, and then turned back to face him again, holding her outstretched arms towards him, beckoning to him as she boldly said: “Then arise Sir Knight! Come and claim your fair maiden of the pool ... come hither and hold me in your arms, so that I may whisper my answer to your proposal in your ears - come to me, my lord ... for I need to feel the warmth of your love once more!”

Nicholas arose, in a daze, and moved to the edge of the pool, then took off his shirt and jeans, leaving him dressed only in his costume, walking into the water towards her, reaching to grasp her outstretched hands, pulling her towards him, enfolding her in his strong arms. Elizabeth welcomed the warmth of his body against her now cool, bare skin. She placed her arms around his neck, moving her mouth to his ear “My answer, dear Knight, is yes! I will be your lady love, I will love you, and only you, with a love that’s both strong and true, forever and ever!” she whispered.

It seemed the most natural thing to do now. They kissed, standing there, almost submersed in their pool, under the soft moonlight, the sounds of the waterfall and surrounding forest serenading them. Lizzie pulled away, taking his face in both her hands, looking up into his eyes. “I love you Nicholas Strauss, and one day, when the time is right, you’re going to ask me to marry you—in real life. I just know you will! And if you remain the principled man I’ve always known—the man I fell in love with, I will then too say yes!” Then she kissed him and he, feeling the euphoria of knowing that Elizabeth truly loved him, took her in his strong arms and kissed her, gently at first, then much more urgently, passionately - prompting her to quickly say “waterfall!” in-between heated, shallow, breathing. Laughing, they separated.

Lying on their backs looking up at the moon and the stars, using their hands and legs to stay afloat, they swam, and chatted, happily. Later, they left the pool, then dried and dressed again. Now Elizabeth and Nicholas lay next to each other, on their backs, looking up at the stars, on dry land, her head on his arm, tucked into his shoulder, and she whispered in his ear ...

“We did want our play-acting to be as real as possible, and I

did ask—as you will recall, that you should turn and place your face down into the pillow so that I could change into my costume! Well, I really did—my swimming costume!” she said laughing. “You see, I knew in the semi-darkness of our surroundings, your eyes would not distinguish between pale blue and skin-tones, so to you, I’d appear naked, even though I was back in my pale blue bikini, fully dressed! Nicholas, best of all - you’ve passed the test!” Relieved, Nicholas laughed along with her. Lizzie had planned her acting debut meticulously, but his eyes, mind, imagination and his heart had done her work for her. All was well again in their little world, and it sure was a loving, happy little world! They’d survived – their love had survived. They’d made the transition from teenage summer romances – theirs was now an adult love, and the adult world always demanded much more from its lovers!

* * *

“I’ve never been so humiliated in all my life!” Constance said, backing up the Mercedes in the parking lot of the Holiday Inn.

“I think you’re making too much of it, dear,” Edwin responded.

“You never came to my defense, not even once!” Constance said. “The least you could have done is to not laugh at all his jokes and not agree with everything he said.”

“But dear, you must admit, he has a point—it’s not our lives, and Lizzie and Nicholas do look rather happy to be together ...”

Constance didn’t let him finish. “Happy? What do you know about happy!” she screeched. “Happy doesn’t pay the bills Edwin! Happy doesn’t live in a big house or drive a Mercedes!”

Edwin thought about it a brief moment, thinking to himself that he would trade all of those things for “happy,” but it was too late for him now. “But dear, we were happy when we had a small home and a little car—even when all we had was my motor-bike.”

Constance interrupted, not letting him finish. “Yes, and we had to drive around with me and Elizabeth in a sidecar next to you until we could afford an old, used car! That’s a happy outcome?”

“But it was kind of fun—Lizzie liked it,” Edwin retorted.

“Well, what do kids know about such things anyway? She’s still just a kid—she doesn’t even stop to think what life could be like if she used her head instead of her heart!” she ranted.

Edwin thought it best to not reply anymore. He’d had too much to drink. He’d been laughing and giggling and having way too much fun with Johann. It felt like Constance had taken him out from there by his ear, like a naughty little boy. She was furious, and he was partly to blame. Best shut up now and go home.

“And we’re expected to go and spend Christmas Day with the Strauss family—I won’t know where to hide my head! I mean, I

have to face Kathleen knowing that she was there when you made such an idiot out of yourself—and of me!” She scolded him.

“I’m sorry, dear. I’m feeling sick. Can we please just go back to our caravan? I need to get some sleep,” Edwin pleaded.

“Well it jolly well serves you right! A man of your standing should know better than to drink too much champagne!”

They rounded the last corner, and drove down the road towards their camp site. It was still early, not quite 11:00 pm, and all the adults from Siesta were still at the Holiday Inn, enjoying their Christmas Eve dinner-dance, all except them. Constance parked the car and got out, slammed the door and stormed off in a huff. Edwin just sat there for a moment, pondering his fate. He was glad they were going to spend part of Christmas with the Strauss family tomorrow. He could use reinforcements protecting him from his wife’s scorn and wrath!

* * *

The Philips cassette player Lizzie had brought with her was playing soft Christmas Music as she and Nicholas lay in each other’s arms, looking up at the stars, chatting away happily.

This was a wonderful idea! They chatted about anything, and everything—and also about the last Christmas Eve they’d spent here. The candles were doing a good job of keeping mosquitoes at bay, and the sound of the waterfall provided pleasant background noise which, when combined with the chorus of frogs and crickets, and Christmas carols, sounded ethereal and comforting.

“Nicholas,” Lizzie said, “Have you given any thought to your wish for tonight? We still each have two left . . . plus one.”

“Hmm . . . let me guess,” Nicholas said “We can only make one wish each, here, while we’re with each other, every Christmas Eve we spend together here? Is that it?” he asked her.

“Well, that may be a bit impractical, but for now, let’s just say that’s the case—until we’ve both used up our two individual wishes. Then for the last wish of the seven, which we can only make together, in full agreement, we need to be back here again, but not necessarily on Christmas Eve,” she suggested.

“Sure, I guess, it makes sense. So are you ready to wish yet?” Nicholas asked. “You know—girls first!”

“Yes, but I think you’re just scared to go first . . . anyway, I will.”

With that Elizabeth lay back, looking for a bright star, found it, then made her wish; “*Star light, star bright, the first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight . . . that I will marry my true love, regardless of whom my mother thinks, for me, is right.*”

“Bravo! Well said, Lizzie! That’s a beautiful wish! I just know

it's going to come true!" Nicholas said, giving her a warm hug.

Elizabeth smiled snuggling tighter in his arms, while thinking to herself. *"And my true love is you, Nicholas, I'll bet on it!"*

"I'm done making my wish. How about you?" Lizzie asked.

Nicholas breathed in, cleared his throat, then made his wish.

"Star light, star bright, the first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight . . . that I will only ever be engaged to, and marry, one woman - my true love, regardless of whom Lizzie's mother thinks, for her, is right."

"That's a beautiful wish, Nicholas! Lizzie whispered in his ear. I wonder who that lucky woman is? Have you met her yet?" Lizzie teased him, giving him a kiss on his cheek, knowing full well whom he meant. Nicholas just laughed, wrapping both his arms around her before replying, "Oh yes, Lizzie ... many times!"

With that Nicholas pulled the other open sleeping bag over them, and they snuggled tightly in each others arms, with Christmas carols playing. Before long, they were fast asleep.

When Nicholas awoke, Lizzie was still sleeping peacefully in his arms, but he didn't wake her. Instead he gently reached up and turned the TDK C-180 over, to play the carols on it's flip-side, and spent the time just lying there feeling the warmth of her body next to his, savoring every moment of this new reality! It had been a long, lonely time without her. As he lay there, it occurred to him: *Maybe, just maybe, prayers are answered and dreams do come true?* He was, after all, back with her in his arms again in their beautiful secret place! After a while of dreaming and lying listening to her peaceful, rhythmic breathing, he kissed her forehead. She stirred, smiling, then snuggled even tighter into his arms. He sighed. *Life was perfect! Can it ever get any better than this?* He thought to himself. *No, he concluded - probably not.* The stars sparkled brightly in the sky, and the moon's soft, gentle light shimmered on the mirrored surface of the pool. The forest was quieter now and only one frog was still trying to call its mate. Nicholas wished him well. Why should he be the only lucky one here, tonight? Nicholas smiled, then drifted off, back to sleep again, dreaming happy dreams, and in his dreams, Lizzie loved him, and he loved her, just as it finally now was in reality.

* * *

The tape-player switched itself off with a loud mechanical click, and Nicholas awoke again, feeling the need to check the time. Even though Lizzie was a sophomore now, and able to set her own times, it didn't seem right to take her back to her family, too late. He checked his watch. 12:15 am—it was Christmas morning. He decided to wake Lizzie, gently kissing her on her hair and

forehead as she lay snuggled up in his arms. This time he was more insistent, and Elizabeth responded.

"Oh Nicholas," Lizzie said, I've had such lovely dreams! Now I know dreams can come true. I'm here with you, lying in your arms, exactly two years after we made our first two wishes!"

"It occurred to me too, Lizzie, as I lay here next to you - you asleep in my arms." Then he continued "I'm not sure what lies ahead for us, but at least for now, life is perfectly happy again."

"Yes, Nicholas, I don't want this to ever end—that was our wish! I'm hoping, well praying, for just that outcome," she said.

"Lizzie, I don't want to get you into any trouble with your mom, so we may want to slowly start heading back now," he advised.

"Probably . . . what time is it?" she asked.

"Just past midnight," Nicholas replied, quickly adding "Merry Christmas, Lizzie! Merry Christmas ... my darling Lizzie!"

Elizabeth kissed him on his cheek, whispering into his ear "Merry Christmas, Nicholas. I have the most wonderful gift this Christmas. I'm back in your arms again, and feeling your love!"

Nicholas smiled, and then raised himself up on one hand, leaning over her, playing with her hair with his other hand.

"Lizzie, I never gave up hoping, dreaming—though plenty of people thought I should. I cannot give up on you, you are part of my soul now, and it's just not possible. I want you to know that I'll never cheat on you. I hope my honesty doesn't frighten you. I'm past the stage of playing it safe where you are concerned. If I should ever lose you—and please God, I pray that never happens, I'll never give up hope! Please believe me," Nicholas implored her.

Lizzie looked up into his eyes, then reached up with her hands and placing them behind his head, pulled him down towards her eager, slightly parted, lips. There was a new tenderness to their kisses now, borne out of sincere gratitude, one to the other, for the survival of their young summer love, against all the obstacles it had faced. It was a tacit admission that they were now adults, and their love was finally free to flourish and grow as they got to spend almost all year together, at university.

"Nicholas . . ." Lizzie spoke first, "Let's slowly pack up and go back now. At least for this year, our secret place has done its job well. We are sure of each other's love and thankful for the chance to love again. Now we must go and get on with that happy task!"

* * *

The trip back, in the canoe, in the moonlight was less scary and daunting than it had been two years ago, when there had been no moon. The candles on the bows of the canoe between them added an ethereal quality to their trip, as the canoe silently

glided through the water, cutting a path across the mirrored surface of that dark river. Moonlight highlighted the surrounding forest and the valley's sides. Lizzie had put in a tape of Christmas carols, and as Nicholas rowed, she softly hummed and sang along with the choirs, all the time holding onto her long-stemmed, perfectly formed white Cala Lily, looking radiant, happy, in love.

It was 1:30 am when they reached the grassy banks of the inlet in front of Lizzie's family's caravan. Lizzie stepped out, helping Nicholas gather all her belongings. They were relieved to find that this time Constance wasn't waiting up for them.

Lizzie placed her items down inside the front tent, and then went back out to Nicholas, waiting on the riverbank, next to the small scrappy tree, with all of his items.

She placed her arms around his back, and Nicholas took her willingly into his arms again, and they kissed on the banks of that dark stream, in the moonlight, that Christmas morning of 1975. Lizzie looked up into his eyes, and bade him good night.

"Nicholas, thanks for the most wonderful Christmas Eve of my life! There's a pattern emerging here ... tonight was better even than the first Christmas Eve we shared two years ago. Now our love is openly declared and the distance between us is soon to be removed. We're finally free to love each other. Thank you!"

"Lizzie," Nicholas replied, "I couldn't have said it better myself! But this time Christmas is going to be wonderfully sweet too!"

"Yes, I'm sure hoping for a memorable Christmas!" she said with a wink, "Remember two years ago, when you were banned from seeing me on Christmas day?"

Nicholas winced, laughing nervously. He remembered!

"Relax, I won't let that happen now! Those times are over."

And with that, they shared one last lingering kiss, bidding each other farewell. Lizzie stayed, watching Nicholas walking back towards his family caravan - watching as he turned and blew her a kiss. She caught it, held it to her chest and sighed. So much had conspired to thwart their summer love, but somehow their young love had weathered all the storms and had escaped the cleverly-laid traps designed to destroy it. It felt, to her that this happy outcome was not just by chance. She looked up towards the stars, and whispered, "I know You're there, and I know You care! Thank You . . . thank You, from the bottom of my heart—for keeping Nicholas safe, for keeping our love safe, and for returning him to me when the time was right." With that, Lizzie dropped her head to her chest, closed her eyes, her lips still moving. "Amen," she said, lifting her head as her eyes opened. She sighed a happy sigh as she went inside to crawl into her bed.

Chapter 11

Christmas Day came, and by then Elizabeth's mother had calmed down enough to treat Nicholas with some degree of civility. After a few days, as tempers cooled, he'd tried to make mention of Constance's interference and suggested that he'd forgiven her, that it was all forgotten now, but she'd become indignant at his inference that she'd done anything wrong.

"You've forgiven me? For what?" Before Nicholas had been able to reply, she'd smirked and continued on as though his reply were irrelevant. "Don't be ridiculous, Nicholas, if I needed your forgiveness, I would ask for it."

Nicholas had been surprised by her response. He'd at least expected a tacit admission of her wrongdoings, but then he began to understand what a proud woman Constance must be, and he decided it would be easier to swallow his own pride. As for Elizabeth and her family, they'd come to some sort of resolution which he was unaware of and afraid to ask about.

In the end, he decided it didn't matter. By now Constance had to see that her daughter had made her own choice, despite everything done to influence her in that regard, and now there was nothing left to do but to respect Elizabeth's choices. Elizabeth was her own person, and no one was going to pull her strings—that much was plain for anyone to see.

Meanwhile, Nicholas's father had given him some reassuring advice. "Elizabeth's parents will come around. All parents love to re-live their lives through their children. It's the closest thing we have to a time machine. When we see our own mistakes being repeated, we can't help but try to make our children do better, but the trouble with that is that a mistake is often simply a matter of one's perspective. The choices that were wrong for you might be right for your children and vice versa." With that in mind, Nicholas felt like he could cut Elizabeth's parents some slack. Maybe there was something in Constance's past that she was trying to compensate for through her daughters. He had a brief recollection of how she and Edwin had married against the wishes of her parents. If he recalled correctly, she, too, had had

two men to choose from, and one of them had been much like Charles. Maybe she was trying to see what that other path might have looked like?

Today, however, Christmas day, Nicholas's and Elizabeth's families had decided to celebrate together at the Strauss family's campsite. In the spirit of the holiday, everyone was making a great effort to get along, though Nicholas observed that Edwin was maintaining a careful distance from his wife, staying close to Johann and the grill and drinking copious quantities of beer with Nicholas's father. Hattie and Nicholas's younger sister, Kristina, were playing together down by the river with some friends, while Philip and Linda were sitting side by side around the *braai*, locked in each other's arms. Nicholas and Elizabeth were a mirror image of them, sitting on the other side of the circle of lawn chairs. Constance sat all by herself, as far from everyone else as possible, her arms crossed and lips pouting. Nicholas's mother sat facing Constance.

Constance volunteered very little conversation, and gave the most clipped answers possible whenever someone tried to draw her out. She was obviously still mad, but Nicholas felt she had no right to be. After all, he was the one who'd been wronged—both him and Elizabeth. Constance was the culprit, not the victim, but somehow she'd turned that all around in her head and was sitting there feeling sorry for herself.

Nicholas decided not to let it ruin his day. He had only a few days left of his leave and he wanted to enjoy them to the fullest with Elizabeth. For Elizabeth's part, she was ignoring her mother and lavishing her attention on him instead. Nicholas couldn't say he objected to that.

At the moment she was gazing adoringly into his eyes, her elbows propped on the armrests of their chairs. "So . . ." she began, a wry grin tugging at the corners of her mouth, while her deep blue eyes twinkled mischievously at him.

He found her grin infectious, and smiled back. "What?"

"When are we going to exchange presents?"

His smile broadened, and he dropped a quick kiss on her forehead. "You'll just have to wait."

She shoved him playfully. "That's mean!"

He began laughing. "Well, all right," he said, rising from his chair. "Give me a moment. I'll be right back."

"Okay," Elizabeth replied, smiling broadly. She sat on the edge of her chair, waiting eagerly for him to return. When he did come back, he was toting a small, white rectangular box with a silver bow tied around it. He sat down beside her and smiled as he

watched her eyes widening.

"Is that . . ."

"It's not much," Nicholas said, his face the picture of innocence. And then he opened the box and revealed a gold mermaid sitting on top of a white pearl pendant. The necklace had a delicate gold chain, all of which had cost him more than he liked to think about in a small tourist shop along the beach. The gold was electroplated, not solid, but it was real enough.

Elizabeth was looking at it like it was the most valuable treasure in the world. She reached out for the necklace with trembling hands, and then she shook her head and stopped herself. "I can't, it's too much, Nicholas!"

"Of course you can, and no it isn't." He took the necklace in both his hands to fasten it around her neck. Sitting back to look at her with the necklace on, he smiled all the more broadly and nodded once. "Beautiful."

Elizabeth picked up the pendant to look at it more closely, still marveling at it. There were tears shining brightly in her eyes, making them a truer, deeper blue than any he could recall having seen before. Now Nicholas handed her the card which he had also bought for her. She accepted and opened it, then proceeded to read aloud the short message he'd written.

Merry Christmas, Elizabeth! Somehow, no matter what, no matter how far away we are, or what comes between us, I can't get over you or forget you, and I think I finally know why. I don't want to forget you, and I don't want to get over you. The heart will always long for its home, and mine has found its home with you. Even though so much has happened, somehow we keep ending up together, and I'm starting to think that's more than merely chance. I'm starting to think it just might be our joint destiny. I hope—I pray that you feel the same way.

Constance snorted at that, but everyone ignored her.

Elizabeth went on, tearfully, "All my love, Nicholas—It's beautiful!" she exclaimed, turning to him and hugging him.

"That *was* beautiful, Nicholas," his mother said.

Johann proposed a toast. "To the happy couple, reunited at last," and with that he raised his beer can and took a long swig. Everyone drank to that, all except for Constance, who didn't have anything left in her glass, and was thus conveniently excused from joining in their toast. Finally, she saw fit to break her self-imposed silence. She regarded her daughter with a thin smile, anticipating the cruel outcome of her plan as she prompted her, "And what did you get for Nicholas, my girl?"

"Well . . ." Elizabeth trailed off. "I didn't have a lot of time or

money, and wasn't given the opportunity to get anything really special like you did, Nicholas," she said, her eyes downcast.

Constance smiled with obvious satisfaction "Yes, well I'm sure it's the thought which counts, isn't that right, Nicholas?"

He ignored Constance and smiled reassuringly at Elizabeth. "I'm sure I'll love anything you give me, Lizzie, I mean, I did rather surprise you by suddenly appearing behind you, unannounced!"

Elizabeth chewed her lower lip uncertainly, and then she stood up from her chair and said, "I'll be right back."

"Okay," Nicholas replied, frowning curiously as she left.

A moment later she returned, but there was nothing in her hands, nor was she hiding anything behind her back. There was however a second necklace dangling from her neck. It was tied with crude red string. Looped through the string, and dangling where the pendant should be, was a Christmas card which said on the front in big gold letters: *Merry Christmas!* Elizabeth came up to him and sat down on his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck and stared meaningfully into his eyes. It took Nicholas a moment to get it, and then a grin sprang to his face and he opened the card around her neck to confirm his suspicions. Inside, the card had all the perfunctory well wishes for a Merry Christmas, and below that, in big, flowery script—in Lizzie's own handwriting, was written:

*I'm your present, Nicholas!
With all my love,
your Elizabeth.*

Nicholas read it aloud, drawing laughs and cheers from the men. Kathleen's response was a more reserved smile. Nicholas responded with a grin and kissed Elizabeth. Constance waited for them to separate once more before making any comment.

"It *was* thoughtful, wasn't it Nicholas?" she asked leadingly.

"Yes!" he agreed.

"A bit of a cop out though . . . but I suppose we can excuse that under the circumstances."

Nicholas frowned. "A cop out?"

"Yes, that card she gave you was one she'd received from her aunt and uncle this morning. She didn't even buy it for you!"

Elizabeth shot her mother a hurt look, but said nothing.

Nicholas smiled knowingly at Constance. "She didn't need to buy it; she gave me something much more priceless than what mere money can buy. I guess it's only a cop out to those who

value money more than a genuine heartfelt gesture of love.”

Constance huffed, looking away. “Well, I suppose there's no accounting for sentimental value. “Priceless? Ha!” she added.

“Yes, priceless indeed!” Nicholas said, shaking his head at Constance’s remarks. “People buy cards that say flowery things others have thought up for them, all the time. I’d prefer words from the heart. Forget the price of any card with someone else’s words. If you took any of them and placed it on a great big pile of money, say a Million Rand, to my left, right now, and asked me to choose it or your daughter sitting here on my lap with her arms around my neck, and a second hand card around hers, with her own heart-felt words of love on it, I’d choose her, and her card every time!” he replied, turning to look lovingly into Lizzie’s eyes.

She smiled back at him. In that moment he knew there was nothing more that could be done to separate them. It didn't matter who or what tried to come between them; they were meant to be together. *Don't they say that love conquers all things?* He was starting to believe it. *Whoever said that was a wise man*, Nicholas thought, he’d heard it before, but he couldn’t remember where.

As if she could sense the tone of his thoughts, Constance stared at Nicholas until he met her gaze. As he did so, he was startled by the intensity of the hatred in Constance's gaze, but just then her eyes suddenly softened. She looked away. He thought there'd been something very sinister lurking there, just behind those pale blue eyes, but decided it was just his imagination. Nicholas glanced around to see if anyone else had noticed the look Constance had given him, but they hadn't. That look of hers had been just for him. He shuddered, then frowned. He'd won. She couldn't dispute it. Elizabeth had pledged her love to him. He’d pledged his love to her. Why was she being such a sore loser? What could she hope to gain by being stubborn? “*Surely ...*” he thought, “*There was nothing left to fight for.*”

Nicholas comforted himself with those thoughts, but a nagging doubt tiptoed around inside his head. He didn't quite manage to identify that doubt, and he wasn't sure he wanted to, but he felt like there was still a question left unanswered in this battle of wills between Mother and daughter—that it wasn’t over yet.

Chapter 12

Goodbyes were horrible. Nicholas hated them with an abiding passion. As he trudged off to tell Elizabeth the bad news, he mentally prepared himself for the conversation. Nicholas had just received a call from his flight sergeant at Mr. Nixon's house. He was being recalled home a day early. He and his radar unit were to be shipped off to a base along the Angolan border to help support their pilots against Cuban MIG fighter attacks. The cease fire had been short-lived. Even worse, the bad news that he and all his fellow conscripts might have to stay on in the military for another year was no longer just a rumor, it was all but publicized fact, and that by itself was enough to crush Nicholas's spirits. He'd planned to leave the military and join Elizabeth at the University of Cape Town. Now what was he going to do? They'd survived long absences before—too many of them—but something told him that his relationship with Elizabeth was resting on a very precarious foundation right now, and that if he weren't there for her now to shore it up, someone else would move in to take his place, and things might never work out for them.

He arrived at Elizabeth's campsite just before lunch. The Smythe family was outside, clustered around the grill, cooking sausages and steak. Edwin was the first to spot him coming and waved. Nicholas waved back, and then Elizabeth came running out to greet him. She collided with him and they kissed.

As she pulled away from him, she noticed his expression.

"What's wrong Nicholas?" she asked, "Why aren't you smiling?"

Nicholas sighed and shook his head. "Where do I begin?"

Constance took that moment to interrupt, calling down to both of them. "Elizabeth, your lunch is ready! If you don't come now, you'll go without."

Elizabeth looked torn. "Would you like to join us for lunch? I'm sure my mother and father won't mind."

Nicholas smiled, knowing full well that her mother *would* mind. "I'd love to join you for lunch," he said and walked with her up to where her family was gathered around the barbecue.

Constance noted Nicholas's appearance with an annoyed look. "Shouldn't you be getting back for lunch with your family?"

"I asked him to join us, Mom. I hope that's okay?"

Constance hesitated, then forced a smile. "Of course you're welcome to join us, Nicholas. Grab a plate." She pointed offhandedly to a pile of paper plates sitting on a lawn chair.

As they were all sitting down to eat, Elizabeth asked Nicholas again what had him so worried, and he frowned down at his food with sudden distaste. "I've been recalled. They're shipping me off to an airbase along the border of Angola."

Elizabeth gasped, and Constance looked up from her food and suddenly stopped chewing, but it was Edwin who spoke first.

"To help in the war against the Cubans?"

Nicholas nodded.

"Won't that be dangerous?" Elizabeth asked.

Nicholas hesitated. "Not really. I'll be housed on the base."

"But they attack airbases don't they?" Constance asked.

"That's rare," he insisted. "I doubt Cuba will want to do that."

Elizabeth looked stricken.

"Well, you just never know," Constance said. "Life can be very uncertain in times of war. It makes it hard to plan for any sort of long-term future sometimes ... but what can you do?"

Nicholas frowned, sensing where she was headed, but he found it hard to disagree. There was more, of course. The news that he would be in the military for another year would come as an even bigger shock, but he had the sense to keep that detail to himself for now. This was a big enough shock by itself.

"Well, it's just for another two weeks, right?" Elizabeth asked.

Nicholas hesitated. *So much for that.* He knew he couldn't afford to lie to her, not after so many recent betrayals. She had to know he was someone she could trust—no matter what. "No, Lizzie," he shook his head. "It isn't a hundred percent confirmed yet, so I didn't want to say anything, but it looks like I might have to stay on for another year, unless a lasting truce is negotiated"

Elizabeth's mouth dropped open and she just stared aghast at him for a long, silent moment.

Constance interrupted the silence gleefully. "Nicholas, this is terrible news. How can you join Elizabeth in Cape Town now?"

Nicholas frowned. He'd had the poor judgment to mention that plan in earshot of Elizabeth's parents, and now it was coming back to haunt him. He knew it made him look unreliable—like he made promises he couldn't keep, that he couldn't be trusted, but that wasn't his fault! Surely Elizabeth saw that. He looked to her with a silent plea for understanding, but she quickly looked away

and set her own plate of food aside.

"Eat your food, Elizabeth," Constance said.

"I'm not hungry."

"All the same. I'll not have it go to waste."

"I'll eat it later."

Constance looked ready to press the point, but then her gaze flicked sideways to Nicholas and her resolve softened. She smiled sympathetically. "Of course, what am I thinking. You two have had a horrible shock. You should take some time now to go and say your goodbyes for another year, or more, while you still can."

Nicholas felt physically sick, heart sore. Somehow it had been less of a shock to hear all of this from his flight sergeant on the phone than it had been to relate it to Elizabeth and her family. It hadn't even been this hard when he'd told his own family—despite all his mother's fretting and protestations—but now it was all really beginning to sink in. He wasn't going to have a chance with Elizabeth after all. He might have won the battle, but he was going to lose the war, thanks to a very *real* war and, like always, there was utterly nothing any of them could do about it. Nicholas didn't know what to say. It was pointless to offer empty reassurances. He and Elizabeth would either be able to survive another year apart from one another ... or they wouldn't.

Nicholas summoned his last reserve of optimism and smiled. "Don't worry, Lizzie. This is nothing new. We'll see each other again in a year's time. Maybe sooner if I can get some leave."

Her smile was a pale shadow of his. "I know," she said softly.

Constance sighed meaningfully, and abruptly Nicholas felt a gut-wrenching sense of dread crawling through his stomach. Despite his better judgment, he asked anyway, "What is it?"

Constance merely shook her head, and her expression turned sorrowful, but Nicholas thought he caught a disingenuous twist in her lips that might have been the beginnings of a smile.

"I haven't the heart to mention it," she said.

"All the same," Nicholas said, "I'd really rather know."

"We've had enough bad news for one day," she insisted.

"Mrs. Smythe," Nicholas said, pressing the point. He waited for her to look up from eating her food. Their eyes met, and Nicholas tried to impress upon her the importance of telling him whatever it was that was on her mind.

"Well, I suppose you have a right to know," she sighed. "It's just that all of this is really very untimely."

"I don't see how it could ever be timely," Nicholas replied, "but what exactly do you mean by that?"

Constance's gaze eluded his and found her husband. "Well, I

suppose this is as good a time to tell the girls as any, Edwin."

"Tell them?" Edwin asked innocently.

"Yes, yes, about our plans . . . about the move."

Edwin's expression turned miserable. "Oh, yes, *your* plans. I'd almost forgotten about them."

Nicholas frowned, and his dread became more pronounced.

"Move? What move?" Elizabeth asked.

Constance gave a sympathetic smile. "To Canada, dear."

Elizabeth was on her feet in an instant. "Canada? What?" She was shaking her head. "No, it can't be ... I won't go!"

"Sit down Elizabeth, and as for your outburst, you really have no choice. You're not 21 yet, and you'll go along wherever we go."

"But, when did you—" Elizabeth shook her head once more, refusing to believe it. "What are you talking about here?"

"It will all be explained in good time. Calm down, Elizabeth."

Hattie looked on bemused, her brow wrinkling in several directions at once. "But why *Canada*?" Elizabeth asked.

"Because your father has a job waiting for him there, for one."

"When were you planning to tell us?" Elizabeth demanded.

"When it became a little more certain. Now stop being shrill, it's not very becoming, and it's terribly rude. I didn't raise a hellion. Behave yourself!"

"When are you planning to move?" Nicholas asked.

"Well, that's just the thing, Nicholas. It will be in about a year, just about when you're due to come out of the military."

Elizabeth shook her head, refusing to believe any of it. She got up and walked off without wanting to hear another word. Nicholas hurried after her. He heard Constance and Edwin discussing something as he left, but he only caught snippets of it:

". . . think that was the most appropriate time for that?" Edwin's voice.

"When else? Better that we let them down gently now than later have to . . ."

Nicholas caught up to Elizabeth at the river's edge, and he spun her around to face him, but she was crying and beyond reason. He enfolded her in a fierce hug, until she calmed down enough to speak. She buried her face in his shirt, her body shaking, quickly soaking his thin cotton shirt with her tears.

"What are we going to do?" she asked, her voice muffled, but still crystal clear to Nicholas.

He shook his head. "I don't know Lizzie, I really don't know."

"We need another miracle, Nicholas," she said desperately.

* * *

The following day, early in the morning Nicholas's father drove

him back to the airport in George. Elizabeth insisted she come along for the ride. It was a somber trip. As they got closer to George, the Outeniqua Mountains rose up as a barrier against the sea, trapping a thick wall of fog over George. Nicholas's father saw this and shook his head, "They're not going to be taking off in this weather." They drove down into the fog and were immediately forced to drive at a crawl for the last few miles as visibility was cut to just a few meters.

Nicholas felt a brief surge of hope that his flight would be delayed and he'd have more time with Elizabeth. When they got to the airport they found that Nicholas's flight was indeed cancelled, but his orders hadn't changed and he was being redirected over the mountains to Oudtshoorn, in the arid semi-dessert, where he would catch a different flight. The trip over the mountains was a few hours. Nicholas felt some small relief at that; right now every minute with Elizabeth was precious. They were sitting close together on the front seat of the truck as they had been since leaving Siesta. It was a broad bench seat with no armrests or abutments to separate one passenger from the next, so they could sit there, wrapped up in each other's arms as Johann drove.

They didn't make much conversation, though Johann tried to lighten the mood every now and then with a joke or a funny story. They tried to laugh, but soon the punch lines fell flat and Johann gave up. This was no time for small talk or jokes. It was the end of their dreams. They'd been reunited for a few short days, just long enough for them to begin to plan their futures together for the first time *ever*, and now they were being torn apart yet again. What forces were so dead set against their love? Why did they have to endure an endless series of ecstatic hellos and heart-wrenching goodbyes? It didn't seem fair. It was as though Fate or Destiny or God, or whatever was responsible, was playing with their lives. Nicholas kept those thoughts to himself. Not even Elizabeth, though she was going through the same things right now, would understand his doubts. Given his upbringing it seemed sacrilegious to him as well, but he could hardly argue with the facts. None of recent events made any sense. For just the briefest moment everything had seemed to align perfectly in a way that was surely more than mere coincidence, and then all of their hopes and dreams were dashed again into maddening disarray. Life made no sense; it was just a lot of random nonsense and misery. There was no point to it, no tidy wrapping up of loose ends that could make Nicholas see and believe in some Divine plan. No, he thought, God's obviously got more important things to do than to worry about their love and lives.

When they were coming down out of the mountains, the fog parted, and they were given a stunning view of Oudtshoorn. The variegated patchwork of crops and brown dirt of ostrich corrals dotted the plains below. All these cultivated fields and pens for animals were hedged with bright green lines of trees that seemed to glitter in the valley below with the golden hues of the sun. Gabled peaks of a few homes and buildings peeked out above the trees, twinkling brightly with the sheen of reflected sunlight.

Then, all too soon, they were driving through the town to the outskirts on the other side, to the small airport located there. They parked and walked to the small terminal building. All the usual procedures were twice as fast due to the low volume of passengers, and soon Nicholas was waiting with a handful of others to board the plane—an old propeller-driven Douglas DC-3, a Dakota from WW-II.

Even now they sat in silence. Nicholas and Elizabeth were side by side, holding one another's hands, staring straight ahead with dull, unfocused eyes. Johann sat beside them reading the local paper. Then the call for boarding came, and Nicholas and Elizabeth came reluctantly out of their mutual daze. They turned slowly to look at one another. They held each other's gaze for a long moment, neither knowing what to say, each one's eyes searching the other's - for they knew not what, and then Nicholas stood up and Elizabeth with him. They hugged, holding each other tight for a long, desperate moment. When they broke away, Elizabeth was crying and Nicholas wasn't far off. He already had her address so that he could write to her at university. At least her mother would have no power to intercept the mail there at her residence. Yet again, however, he had no clue what his address would be, so for now it was just a one-way line of communication.

"This isn't goodbye, Lizzie," he insisted. By now the words were trite, but they'd been proven time and again to hold true.

She shook her head. "How can it not be? You're going off to war in Angola, and by the time you're back, I'll be leaving the continent for Canada - maybe I will already be gone!"

Nicholas grimaced miserably. "Anything can happen between now and then Lizzie," he said, clinging desperately to hope.

"Like what?" Elizabeth asked, hoping for a silver-lining.

Johann stood off to one side, still reading the local newspaper, pretending to be engrossed in it to give them some privacy.

Nicholas shook his head. "All I know, Lizzie, is that things have looked hopeless for us before, and somehow it always works out. I'm not giving up on you, on us—ever! And neither should you."

She nodded. "That's true. It's almost like God has been looking

out for us somehow, frustrating any evil forces pitted against us, wishing to keep us apart. Remember to pray Nicholas . . .”

Nicholas frowned. “God, Fate, I don't know. Maybe we're just lucky, but hey, I've prayed before about this, and I will again.”

She shook her head. “Nicholas, if all we have is luck, then we're in deep trouble. Luck will run out sooner or later. We need more than luck to help us, and I think that's what's happened.”

“Maybe your parents won't really leave. Your dad doesn't seem that keen to go. Talk to him. I think you'll be surprised with what he says. He seems to like his new job now, and all its perks.”

“You don't understand, Nicholas,” Elizabeth said, shaking her head. “My mother always gets her way. It really doesn't matter what he thinks. We all get to do what she demands of us.”

“That can't be.” Nicholas shook his head. “No marriage would survive long like that. There has to be some give and take. I think your mother's pushing him too far with this. It's just a hunch. And remember, your mother has done this to us before. In fact she's done it almost every time we had to say goodbye in Siesta, and there was always a convenient excuse when things didn't work out quite the way she said they would. I think your father has more say in all of this than what you're giving him credit for.”

The final boarding call came then, and Nicholas cast a quick look over his shoulder. He looked back to Elizabeth with a grimace and then enfolded her in a hug once more. “Don't worry. We'll figure this out.” Then it struck him, and he smiled.

“Besides Lizzie, if she always got her way, you'd still be engaged to Charles right now, and we'd have never even met again—so you see, you have your part to play in all of this too!”

“Yes, you're right . . . okay,” she said, drying her eyes and cheeks against his uniform. “I'll keep praying and thinking positive. But please, Nicholas, even if you don't believe, agree to pray for a miracle, for us. We can use all the help we can get!”

“There's no harm in that, who knows? Okay Lizzie, I'll do that.”

Then they sealed their pact, kissing with a desperate force. They heard Johann clear his throat, then finally let go of each other. There wasn't much time. Nicholas gave his father a quick hug and said goodbye before hurrying out onto the tarmac and boarding his waiting plane. Elizabeth and Johann watched him walk up the stairs to the open door of the old Dakota. He turned briefly from the last step and waved. They waved back, and then the attending ground crew wheeled the staircase away, but just as the door was going to be closed, Nicholas reappeared in the doorway and blew Lizzie a kiss. She caught it and held it close to her heart. Then he was gone.

Elizabeth let out a sudden heartfelt cry and Johann turned to her with a pained look. "Come on, Lizzie," he said, guiding her by her shoulders, let's stand over there where you can be seen better by Nicholas, so that you can wave to him as the plane takes off. Knowing my son, he's smart enough to sit next to a window on the side where he can still see you." They watched the engines start up, and the plane turned to taxi down the runway . . . once at the end, it abruptly turned, paused briefly, then the motors made a huge noise as it begin to gather speed. By the time it passed where Lizzie and Johann stood, it was starting to leave the ground, and Nicholas, his faced pressed against the porthole, saw Lizzie and his dad standing waving at him. He smiled. Mission accomplished! He'd come all this way to get his girl. He'd got his girl! The battle was won—but now the war still lay ahead.

* * *

The way back was proving just as silent as the way there, but Johann had something in mind to say, and he couldn't keep it to himself. Once he'd sharpened and refined his thoughts, he shot her a quick look to see if he could catch her attention. She was staring absently out the window, looking despondent.

Johann redirected his attention to the road. "You know, Elizabeth, Nicholas is right."

In his peripheral vision he caught Elizabeth turning away from the window to look at him. "What do you mean?"

He met that look for a brief second before continuing. "From what I have seen and heard, I'd say that your mother has been trying everything she can to keep you and Nicholas apart."

"I know, and I don't care. It's not her choice. I've made that clear . . ."

But Johann continued, "That's good, Elizabeth, but you must surely also realize that if she was not above lying and manipulating to get her way before, she could easily do it again. This business about your family moving to Canada . . ." Johann shook his head. "I wouldn't be so quick to believe it if I were you."

Elizabeth sighed. "That would be crossing a new line for her. If it's true, she'll soon have to tell others, too, and then she won't just be lying to me."

"Do you think that matters to her?"

"Yes. She cares a lot about her image—about what other people think of her. Besides, I've noticed some things. . . ."

"What things?" Johann asked.

"My parents keep talking—no, arguing—about South Africa's problems. My mother says that we need to get away before everything explodes. I think maybe this is her plan to do that."

"But if that's the case, why are you still studying at UCT?"

"I—" Elizabeth frowned, seeing Johann's point.

"If they're planning to leave, why not save their money for a university in Canada rather? Otherwise it's really a big waste."

"I don't know. Maybe they'll let me stay here until I finish."

"Then why the concern that you and Nicholas will never see each other again? In fact, why would she even bother to set you up to marry this boy - *what's-his-name* ... Charles, if she planned to leave the country? It seems like she's been making too many long-term plans which are confined to South Africa for her to be seriously considering a move to Canada or any other country."

"Maybe." Elizabeth shook her head. "I don't really know."

"Besides, even if it's true, Elizabeth, Nicholas is right about something else, too. She's pushing your father too far. If you don't want to leave, and he doesn't want to leave, how is your mother going to force you both to do so? Speak to your father, and your sister too. Maybe you'll find some support among them."

"Yes . . . in that I think you and Nicholas are both right."

"And one more thing . . ." Johann cleared his throat, wondering if he should say it, then decided to do so anyway.

"While I don't want to second-guess my son and your feelings for one another, or your intentions towards him, I've seen a lot of couples in love, in my time, and you two do fit that description."

Lizzie blushed visibly. She smiled at him. She didn't disagree.

"So if he declares his love for you, in a more formal manner, and you feel the same way about him, how can your mother force you to leave?" Johann asked, flashing her a quick smile.

"But my mother says I'm not 21 yet," Elizabeth replied "She says I have no choice—that I have to do as she says."

"Elizabeth, she's bluffing, and she's bullying you. That's not true," Dr. Strauss said, his voice authoritative and reassuring.

"Then just maybe I can stay here with Nicholas." Lizzie said, a smile appearing on her face "But I'll have no support group?"

"Well it's up to you and Nicholas, but I'd say that if you ever became part of this family, you can count on our support!"

Lizzie smiled at him, her eyes moist, but now filled with hope.

"Don't despair Elizabeth. Don't ever give up. Fight back! Your mother can't ruin your life if you don't give her permission to," Johann said, adding "and I strongly recommend you don't!"

"Thank you, Dr. Strauss," Elizabeth smiled weakly at him. "You've given me hope and a lot to think about. I'll heed your advice. I can see now how Nicholas got to be so wise."

Johann shot her a roguish grin. "Chip off the ol' block, Lizzie."

* * *

Constance was at Mr. Nixon's house, borrowing his phone again. "Charles, you're not listening to me! He's gone. He'll never be back!" adding "Now's the right time for you to try again."

"I've heard that before," Charles replied dryly.

"Oh please, save your wounded pride and listen to me."

"I'm listening. I've been listening the whole time. You're the one who's not listening, Mrs. Smythe! It's over. I honestly don't care anymore. She's crossed a line. Short of her begging me on hands and knees to take her back, it's just not going to happen."

Constance bristled at his tone, but she stowed her own pride for the moment. "And if she *were* to beg?"

"Well, I don't know—But I don't think she ever would?"

Constance sighed. "Listen, just agree to think about it, will you? Nicholas is out of the picture - for good this time! Elizabeth might be young and foolish, but you and I both know she's a diamond in the rough. With the right influences to guide her, there's no limit to what she could be."

"Yes, I suppose that much is true."

"Then fight for her! If you ever loved her at all, fight for her!"

"I'll think about it . . ."

"Think long and hard, Charles. The path of true love never did run smooth." Constance heard Charles hesitate at that.

"True."

The beginnings of a smile flickered to her lips. "I'm glad you can see reason. I've always admired that about you."

"Yes, well, I really have to be going, Mrs. Smythe."

"Very well. We'll be back in about a week. If you do plan to do something, Elizabeth will be back in Cape Town starting from the 12th of January, or you may plan to come see her sooner in Wellington. You'd be welcome ... it's up to you."

"I'll let you know."

"Of course. Take care, Charles."

"Likewise."

With that, the line went dead. Constance set the phone down with a frown. Charles had been unusually difficult, but she supposed she could understand that. She would forgive his rudeness in light of all that had happened. She had been shocked when Charles had told her at the beginning of the phone call that he'd been close by and witnessed Elizabeth and Nicholas's meeting along the beach. She *had* wondered why he'd never shown up to take Elizabeth to the dance later that night. She'd thought maybe he had, but that he'd somehow seen Elizabeth and Nicholas together and had promptly left. She had never imagined that he'd been there, with a grand-stand view, when all

of their carefully laid plans had fallen apart so unpredictably.

Constance shook her head. She thanked Mr. Nixon on her way out of his house. Clearly he was taking great advantage of his monopoly of the phone lines and she resented him for it.

When she returned to her campsite, Edwin was there to ask her how it had gone. "Fine," she said, and disappeared inside the tent to get herself a Coke. She decided to keep the details of the phone call to herself, even though neither Elizabeth nor Hattie were around to hear. It wasn't that she thought she couldn't trust Edwin. He had proven himself time and again in that regard. Rather, she felt that her plans needed to be more concrete before she shared them or she might look the fool. And at the moment, she really had no detailed plan.

She needed something to tip the balance in her favor. . . . She knew Elizabeth wouldn't welcome Charles back, and Charles wouldn't welcome Elizabeth back. It seemed like a hopeless situation, but perhaps *time*, as it was often said, would heal all those wounds—or a golden opportunity would present itself.

Constance realized she would have to wait and see.



Nicholas and his dad, Dr. Johann Strauss, on the Wilderness beach.

Chapter 13

When Nicholas returned to base he was given only a few hours gather his belongings before they were to board a transport truck to AFB Pietersburg, where the mobile radar unit was stationed. There he would do a short training course with them, before being flown up to the Caprivi-Strip air-field, on the border with Angola. He took the time to say his goodbyes to Shorty and Bakkies. Mighty was already on the frontlines with his Mirage squadron, flying sorties in support of ground-troops in southern Angola. When Nicholas was done saying goodbye and packing his things, he went straight to see his flight sergeant about the rumors that they were going to be staying on in the air force for another year. Sergeant Koets confirmed it, un-officially – but held out some hope, saying that he'd heard rumors of a possible deal brokered by the UN. Nicholas quickly latched onto that small hope, otherwise he'd have to acknowledge that he'd be kept apart from Elizabeth for at least another year, and if her mother was serious about moving her family to Canada, perhaps this time he wouldn't ever see her again. He didn't want to even think about that, so he pushed those thoughts from his head, trying to focus on more immediate things. His bags were packed, he had his orders, there were a few minutes left before he needed to get to the transport truck with the rest of his unit. He felt ready, but like there was still something he was forgetting. Something important. Nicholas focused on that thought for a moment, trying to follow it to the source of his anxiety.

His eyes lit up with sudden insight. He'd forgotten to check his mail. He hurried back through the main complex, whipping down the corridors with his heavy pack rattling on his back, until he reached the mail room. He saw the line of soldiers waiting for their mail, but ran right by them to the front and hurriedly explained to the private manning the mail room that he had only a few minutes before shipping out. The private frowned, but allowed the breach of procedure.

So it was that an hour later Nicholas was sitting in the back of the transport truck, being bumped and jostled around like cargo

as he went through the few letters he'd received. There were Christmas Cards from a few aunts and uncles, some from his cousins, and then one from Denise and her older sister, Cathy. Smiling, Nicholas selected that letter to open first. They'd both written in the card. Cathy spoke briefly about her studies at UCT, and then more at length about her engagement and upcoming wedding. Nicholas had already heard about all of that from Denise, but it was nice to hear it from the source for a change. The wedding was set for January 25th, and of course he was invited to be a groomsman. The invitation was enclosed with the card. Nicholas withdrew the invitation and read all the details. Now he began to frown. How was he going to make it to her wedding? He'd be far away in Angola with no leave in sight. He sighed and went on to read Denise's part of the letter.

She was no longer dating Tabu. They'd broken up with the news that she was going to join her two older sisters at UCT. Neither of them believed in long-distance relationships, but Denise explained that there'd been other problems besides the distance. She went on to ask Nicholas if there was anyone special in his life. Nicholas smiled bitterly at that. The answer was *yes*, but it may as well have been *no*.

Abruptly he realized that both of the girls who had mattered most to him over the years were going to be studying at UCT while he was trapped in the air force in a whole other country. It wasn't fair! He banged his head against the side of the truck with a reverberating thump, and looked up at the ceiling in silent appeal, then he closed his eyes and went on thumping his head against the side of the truck in mindless misery.

The corporal seated across from him smiled wryly. "Don't put a dent in your head, *broer*."

Nicholas opened his eyes and gave the man a weary look. His nickname was Buttercup. He nodded to the pile of letters in Nicholas's lap—to the one he was reading in particular. "Girlfriend?"

Nicholas shook his head. "Something like that."

"They come and go, *broer*."

"Well, right now I'm the one who's going."

"Yeah, but can't help that, can you?"

"I guess not."

Nicholas looked away, out the back of the truck to the miles of road retreating behind them. The dry grass and shrubs along the road were receding in an endless brown and green blur. He tried to imagine how many more miles would soon separate him from Elizabeth. He groaned and turned back to finish reading Denise's

letter. When he was done, he shook his head and folded it back into its envelope. He'd have to write from Angola to explain why he couldn't make it to Cathy's wedding. By the time his letter arrived he would have missed it, but there wasn't much he could do to let them know ahead of time.

With all of this in mind, Nicholas began to wonder if his plan to become a fighter pilot wasn't still ultimately the best one. Every time he set that option aside, it reemerged as a logical path. At least that way he could make some use of the year he had left to serve. He could join the pilot's training program. Then, rather than wasting the next year, he'd be putting it into training for his career. If he thought about the possibility of being with Elizabeth, that path became less appealing, but if he took her out of the picture, he realized it was what he wanted to do. But did he still stand a chance with her? Could they survive being apart another year? Would she even still be in the country after another year? Regardless, university was not a likely place for her to remain single for long. So if he didn't have any hope of a future with her, why was he putting off his dreams for a long shot? For something that he couldn't really count on. Now was the time to be realistic, not optimistic. Maybe some dreams were mutually exclusive. In a way the choice seemed to have been made for him. He may have only one dream left to follow. The logical thing was to accept that.

Nicholas looked out the back of the truck once more, his gaze absent and unfocused. The trees and shrubs along the sides of the road were coming into sharper focus. Nicholas frowned at that, abruptly realizing that they were slowing down. The truck came to a full stop, and then he heard the driver talking with someone. The voices were muffled by the steel shell that encased them. Nicholas and the other recruits strained to listen in, but they caught only a few words, nothing significant.

Then the truck jumped into motion again and began a long turn. It stopped after a moment and began backing up. They were turning around. Nicholas frowned and was about to get up and bang on the window separating them from the cab to ask what was going on, but that window slid open before he could ask, and the officer in the passenger's seat poked his head through to talk.

"That was an MP roadblock set up specifically to find, then stop us, before we got too far along in our journey. Your orders have changed. You're going home, boys, you're going home!"

The ensuing cheers were deafening. Nicholas just sat there in shock, the news slowly sinking in. He didn't believe it. He was afraid to let himself hope before he heard the details. When the cheers quieted down, Nicholas was the first to ask, "What do you

mean by *going home*, sir? You mean to AFB Waterkloof?"

"No, I mean you're going *home Corporal!* A treaty was just signed in Angola. You boys will likely be let out on the 10th, as planned. We're going back to AFB Waterkloof for now, but it's all over and we can all get back to the low-grade wars we've grown so accustomed to over the years—those we can handle, in our sleep!"

Another cheer rose up and this time Nicholas joined them. He was grinning wildly and shaking his head. It was too good to be true. All the way back to base he couldn't stop grinning. In all of a moment his whole life had changed, he'd been barreling surely down one path, and then his life had made an abrupt 180 degree turn. Literally. Then Nicholas stopped to think . . . perhaps Elizabeth was right? Maybe there was an unseen hand helping them. It sure felt that way now—either way, it was a nice thought.

There would be no time to let Elizabeth know, so he'd end up surprising her in Cape Town. He'd also be able to make it to Cathy's wedding. He couldn't wait to share the good news with someone. By now Shorty and Bakkies were probably already celebrating their good fortune on the front lines - Mighty too!

* * *

"To our futures!" Nicholas said, raising his glass and clinking it with Grant's and Jamie's. Their last two weeks of service had gone by in a haze of excitement and anticipation. They were all eager to get on with their lives after so long in the armed forces. Unfortunately, they would still be in the reserves and would be obliged to return for 3 months each year, but Nicholas had already spoken with his superiors to postpone that. If one could present a case for why it would be best not to interrupt their life with military service for a few years—such as if one were in university, as he soon would be—then they wouldn't call him up until he was done studying. After that ... well, he'd deal with that when the time came. For now it was comforting enough to know that he was a free man, for the first time in what felt like forever, and he'd stay that way for the duration of his studies at UCT.

Free. He turned the word over in his head, marveling at it. For the first time in his life he wouldn't be bound and held captive by distances, he wouldn't have to conform to strict schedules and other's orders and rules. He'd be free to be with Elizabeth!

"So, Shorty, what's next for you?" Grant asked, leaning back in his chair around one of the tables in the rec hall.

"Well, my girlfriend's father offered me a job," He said smiling.

Nicholas smiled. "Must be nice to have a rich father-in-law to set you up in a cushy job."

"Hey he's not my father-in-law yet, but yeah, it is nice," Jamie

said, leaning back with a big, smug grin.

"Whatever you do don't let her go," Nicholas replied.

"I wouldn't dream of it," he said. "So, what about you guys?"

"I'm going to be a park ranger, I think," Grant said, taking a slow sip of his soda. "I've always loved working with animals."

Nicholas nodded. "Sounds like a good fit for you."

All eyes turned on Nicholas then. "And you, Beaver?" Shorty asked. "Still planning on becoming a fighter pilot?"

Nicholas hesitated. "No, actually, I think I'd like to try civilian life for a while – I kind of like the thought of computers."

Jamie turned to trade a knowing look with Grant. "Eh – He'll say anything to go to UCT now. He's just going to get his girl."

Grant shrugged. "I would."

"Hey, it's not just about her," Nicholas said, feeling defensive without really knowing why, then added "Actually, it is."

"Sure," Jamie said, lifting his glass "Tell us something new!"

"This way I'll have a normal life again, for a change."

"We believe you," Jamie said. Both of them were grinning stupidly. "Since you met Elizabeth, nothing's been normal."

Nicholas looked away, shaking his head. They were right of course, He may say that Elizabeth wasn't his only reason for not wanting to become a fighter pilot; but she was most of the reason – more than enough to tip the balance.

"*Jinne* man, I'm going to miss you guys," Grant said. "But I'm going to miss my dog even more. Sparky is like a little brother to me. I don't know what he's going to do when I leave. I hope they treat him well here."

"I'm sure they will," Nicholas said.

They spent a few more minutes chatting, but then it was time to say their last goodbyes. There was a lot of backslapping and handshaking, and grins all around before they parted ways to pack their things and leave. Nicholas said goodbye to the guys in his barracks and then he was on his way. He was driving down to Sterkspruit to give his parents the good news before he went to Cape Town, also so that he and his father could work out the details of how and where he would stay in Cape Town and study at UCT. His mother would be more than relieved to hear that he'd finally given up on his idea to become a fighter pilot. She'd claim it was the answer to her prayers. Nicholas smiled at that as he drove home. He had to admit there had been some uncanny coincidences of late which had dramatically changed his life. For better or worse he still didn't know, but it certainly felt like they were for the better, now.

Perhaps he'd be wise to keep an open mind ... Time would tell.

Chapter 14

Elizabeth couldn't take it any longer. She had to ask. It had been weeks since her mother had revealed her plan to move them all from South Africa to Canada. Ever since then and ever since Nicholas's father had spoken to her about it, she'd been burning with a thousand different questions—none of which her mother answered. She wanted to ask her father without her mother around to hear, but it wasn't a simple matter to catch him alone. Her opportunity finally came the day that he drove her back to Cape Town to resume her studies at UCT.

"Dad," she began.

"Hmmm?" he asked absently, his eyes on the road. "What's on your mind, Lizzie?"

"Is what Mom said true? Are we going to move to Canada?"

Edwin frowned, taking his time to answer. "She wants to, yes."

Elizabeth noted the cautious way he phrased his answer. He hadn't lied, but neither had he told her anything new, or even really answered her question.

Elizabeth tried again: "But do you want to move?"

Edwin sighed. "Your mother's made a good case for a move."

"But?"

Edwin was silent again.

Elizabeth pressed her advantage, "You know she can't make us leave if we don't want to."

Edwin sent her a wry grin. "Your mother is a determined woman, Elizabeth, and she usually gets her way."

"So let's be more determined."

Edwin let out a short laugh. "Is it any wonder you're my favorite daughter?"

Elizabeth glowed with his praise. It was the closest he ever came to saying he cared. "It's agreed, then? If we stand together she'll be powerless."

"An alliance against your mother?" He said, sending her a shocked, sideways look, his eyebrows raised in horror.

Elizabeth hesitated. "Not exactly . . ."

He broke into a roguish grin. "I'm just teasing. Yes, I agree. It's

nice to know I'm not the only one who isn't eager to leave home and country behind."

"Why should you be? You have everything here! A good job, a nice home, nice cars, friends, family. . . ."

"My thoughts exactly," he said, nodding.

"I wonder why Mom doesn't see it that way?"

Edwin just shook his head. "I don't know, Lizzie."

* * *

"I won't do it!" Constance said, sounding determined.

"You . . . *won't*?" the voice on the other end of the line asked. "Have you forgotten our arrangement?"

"I haven't forgotten, but this has got out of hand. You can't bother me with every little trifle and expect me to pull the necessary strings. Pull some yourself for a change."

"I am. You are one of my strings. You seem to forget that."

Constance gritted her teeth. "I told you, no!"

"Then I suppose it's ok to tell your husband everything. . . ."

Constance snorted to hide the sweaty surge of anxiety that his threat provoked. "He's quite forgotten everything. It would do you little good now to reveal my part in the events that are now just part of ancient history."

"Really? I highly doubt that. One doesn't forget the suicide of a best friend, nor all the guilt that haunts one thereafter. He still blames himself, you know. Of course you know. You live with the man. I find it quite remarkable that you can let him live with his guilt when it rests more properly on your shoulders."

Constance snorted. "Guilt? For what? If my husband is foolish enough to feel guilty, then that's his problem. I cannot fix his broken conscience."

"And what of yours?"

Constance's eyes narrowed. "I did nothing wrong."

"Oh, well, I had forgotten that. I'm glad you've found a way to sleep at night. I wouldn't in your situation."

"I really must be going, Mr. Gaines. Edwin will be home soon."

"Yes, of course he will. I just said goodbye to him at the tannery a few hours ago."

That struck a cold lance of fear into Constance's heart. She could pretend not to care, pretend that he had no power over her, but it was all a big blustery lie, and the chairman surely knew it. She could no more shake off his influence than she could her own skin. At least not yet.

Mr. Gaines began laughing irritatingly. "Shall I take it from the pause in our conversation that you'll think about it?"

"Have a good evening, Mr. Gaines."

He laughed again. "Oh, I will. You have a few months to effect the necessary outcome. I do hope for your sake that you succeed, Miss Smythe—I mean Mrs. Smythe—you *are* still married. For now at least."

The line went dead at that and Constance set the receiver down with a shaking hand. She stood there still as a statue for a long minute, staring at the phone with thoughts of hate and contempt reaching out for the man she'd been speaking to only a moment ago.

She would be glad to finally be rid of his influence. It didn't seem rational to her that he persisted manipulating her to in turn get her husband to do his bidding. He was like a cat toying with a mouse, and just like a cat, he'd soon tire of the game and kill the mouse. She intended to be long gone before he did that. What he didn't know was that he was playing right into her hands with his most recent request. He wanted Edwin to volunteer for another "vacation," to the Great Lakes region of the U.S. but while he was there, Edwin would have a chance to go up to Canada and solidify the job offer George Colton had made. They'd be able to make final their plans to leave South Africa and all at the company's expense. It was perfect, but she couldn't let the chairman know that. If she'd acceded too quickly to his demands, he'd only be back with another more onerous demand. This way his sadistic power game would be satisfied for at least a few more months. Or so she hoped.

There came a jingle of keys in the door. That would be Edwin. Constance turned and started for the door to welcome her husband home. She would wait to let him broach the subject of the business trip. Mr. Gaines had surely already mentioned it to him. She reached Edwin just as he was coming through the door. "Welcome back, dear."

Edwin sighed and sent her a weary smile. "Thank you."

They kissed briefly at the door and then walked on together through the house. She took his suit jacket from him and went to hang it up in the hall closet. "How was work?"

"Good," he said simply.

"I'm glad . . ." she trailed off, watching him walk wearily to the living room and then sit down on the couch and loosen his tie. She went to sit down beside him and began massaging his neck. He began to relax under her kneading hands. "So, I've been thinking. . . ."

Edwin nodded for her to go on. "About?"

"We should really follow up with Mr. Colton in Canada. Make sure he realizes we intend to accept his job offer."

"Hmmm. I wonder if the offer is still open?"

"I took the liberty of calling him before we left for Siesta, and he said the offer was still good. I think it would be better if he heard from you directly, however."

Edwin looked surprised. "You didn't tell me about that."

"I didn't want to bother you with calling him to check. I know how busy you are," she explained.

"Ah, yes, that was thoughtful of you," Edwin said with an accompanying frown.

"Well then, with the time difference, you should probably call him tonight before you go to bed."

"Yes . . . I suppose so." Edwin went quiet at that and his gaze drifted far away. He was staring at an imaginary horizon beyond the fireplace.

"So, any news from work?" Constance asked, massaging his neck again.

"Hmmm?" he asked absently. "No, dear, nothing much."

"Really?" she returned. "Oh, well, no news is good news I suppose." She didn't believe a word of it. Allowing the silence to dominate, for a moment, she tried a different tack. "It's a pity there's no way you could go to see Mr. Colton in person. . . ."

Edwin sighed meaningfully at that.

Constance shot him a look. "What is it?"

"The chairman wants me to go back to the U.S. to visit some of our competitors and associates. I wasn't actually planning to go. I told him I'd think about it."

Constance smiled. "Oh, and why not? It sounds like a wonderful idea. You could go up and visit Mr. Colton while you're there. It's the perfect opportunity."

"Well, yes, I suppose I could. . . ."

"Well, then?"

Edwin turned to look at her, his expression cautious. "You know, I was talking with Elizabeth the other day. She doesn't want to leave, Constance. Neither do I."

Suddenly, Constance stopped massaging his neck and withdrew sharply from him. Her expression was one of intense disapproval. "What do you mean she doesn't want to leave? She doesn't have a choice in the matter! She'll go where we go whether she likes it or not."

Edwin shifted uncomfortably on the couch. "And me?"

Constance gave him an incredulous look. "After all this time, planning and talking about it—*now* you think to raise your objections! You do have fine timing, my dear!"

Edwin frowned. "It's not like that."

"Oh yes it is! I see perfectly well now. You've been lying to me all this time, pretending to agree with me, just waiting in your cowardly way for someone else to come out against the idea before you voiced your real opinion. Or is this all Elizabeth using you to voice her own objections?"

Edwin frowned. "You can't expect me to always agree with you, Constance."

"I don't! What I don't like is that you agree right up until your own daughter convinces you otherwise. She really is a wretched little girl! I don't know how you managed to raise her so poorly. You spoiled her, you know."

Edwin shook his head. "Look, we'll talk about this later. Clearly, you're not in the right mood to have a reasonable discussion."

Constance rose abruptly from the sofa and stalked away without another word.

* * *

Edwin sighed, his heart was hammering in his chest and he felt a hazy muddle of confusion descending on him. What had just happened? Suddenly he wasn't sure anymore of where he stood, or what he should do. All he knew was the familiar dread and icy prickle of fear which accompanied his wife's disapproval. He was going to pay for this over the days and weeks to come. Perhaps it would be wise for him to find some reason to be absent from home for a while until she cooled down. He supposed he could always work on his golf game. . . .

A pity he didn't have any good friends to play with. With that thought he heaved a heartfelt sigh and cast his gaze to the ceiling. *It's not the same without you, Lawrence.*

Chapter 15

Charles wasn't sure who was more foolish, him for taking Constance's advice one last time, or Constance for giving it. Why should he go running back? He wasn't the one who'd made the biggest mistake of his life. Fine, perhaps he shouldn't have conspired with Constance behind Elizabeth's back, but if he hadn't, then Nicholas would have been a blight upon their relationship all along the way, not just at the end. At least this way they'd had some time to build a relationship without his poisonous interference.

But all of that had been ruined when he'd shown up unexpectedly in Siesta. Weeks later, Constance had asked to meet with him, Charles, in Cape Town to explain everything which had happened in Siesta between Elizabeth and Nicholas. She'd explained how Nicholas had to stay on in the military for another year in Angola, and how that would be his ultimate undoing, because she was planning to move her family from South Africa before that year was up.

She went on to explain that all stories of true love had these trials by fire to look back on, and that overcoming the difficulties together always left a couple stronger. She told him that in a marriage and a relationship, sometimes one has to set aside one's pride for the sake of repairing hurt feelings, and then she had gone on to explain how Edwin had often done that with her when he'd done something wrong. Eventually Charles had to credit Constance with the strength of her arguments. Everything she'd said was both true and persuasive. He began to realize what a formidable opponent she must be. *She could convince anyone of anything*, he thought now as Thomas, the new driver, drove him the short distance between his penthouse in Clifton and Elizabeth's residence at the University of Cape Town.

Despite all his reservations, he'd decided to go see Elizabeth one last time. It was a physical effort to set aside his pride, and it was an even greater effort to force down his bubbling ire. He felt just as betrayed as Elizabeth had, perhaps even more so—the tan line from the ring he'd given her had not yet even had time to fade

before she'd been kissing Nicholas's lecherous lips. She had scarcely taken a moment to get over their failed engagement. Did she not miss him at all? Had her love for him been so shallow that she could move on without even a glancing look over her shoulder? Was she not the least bit sad that they might never see one another again?

He shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. He was fast reaching the point where he didn't care anymore. If she was so determined to let him go, he would bloody well let her. She didn't deserve him. He'd already set in motion plans which would take him far, far away from her. Maybe when he was gone she would regret her foolish mistakes, but it would be too late then. Yes, then she'd be sorry, but by then he'd be happy with someone else. When Constance had contacted him, he'd begun to tell her about his plans, but she'd quickly become aghast. "*You can't!*" she'd all but screamed at him.

He'd explained that there was simply nothing left to keep him in South Africa, if not for Elizabeth, so he would go home to England where he would continue his studies. England was more his home than South Africa anyway. He would study hotel management in one of the best schools in England. With that degree in hand, he'd soon be managing world-class resorts and hotels. Then, one day, when his father's money fell from the sky and conked him on the head, he'd open his own hotel and make it one of the most renowned in the world. That was his plan. That would be his future. The only question left was whether or not Elizabeth could be a part of that future, but he certainly wasn't going to beg. He was going to give her one last chance. She could choose to either throw it away or accept it.

He cast a glance to the empty seat beside him, and the bouquet of roses there. In his pocket he carried the ring. Soon he would know her answer. He hoped for her sake she wouldn't be foolish enough to reject him again. He knew that he was the best man for her; she'd never find better, but he was no longer entirely certain that she was the best woman for *him*.

* * *

Nicholas's father had spent the week with him in Cape Town getting him settled into his new apartment. While they were there, his dad had surprised him by buying a two-year-old Ford Cortina for him to replace the aging Beetle Nicholas had bought for himself during his time in the air force.

The new car was a welcome surprise. Nicholas had been unable to stop grinning. It was beautiful car, with a gleaming blue exterior, four doors, and a sporty profile. It looked brand new,

and it roared like a beast with a 3.0L V6 engine. It was the kind of car any young man would be proud to own.

Seeing Nicholas's reaction, Johann had just smiled. "You see, Nick, there are some advantages to taking a sensible path through life. One day you'll do the same for your children."

Now, as Nicholas drove the short distance from his apartment in Liesbeeck Gardens to where he knew Elizabeth was staying in the girls' residence of UCT, Tugwell Hall, he couldn't keep the grin from his face. He couldn't wait to see her reaction when she saw him come to pick her up in his new car. Actually, he couldn't wait to see her period. As far as she knew, he was in Angola fighting the Cubans.

It would be a big surprise! *A memorable reunion*, he thought.

* * *

"What do you mean she won't come down?" Charles asked, picking up the roses he'd placed on the counter and shaking them at the receptionist like a weapon. "Call her again."

"I'm sorry, sir, but she said she doesn't want to see you."

"Call her again!" he demanded, his eyes flashing darkly.

The receptionist flinched and eyed him dubiously for a moment as if she were about to run away and call security.

Charles deliberately softened his expression and his tone. "I'm sorry," he shook his head and forced a pleasant expression. "Would you please call her again, and this time, let *me* speak to her?"

The receptionist hesitated briefly, but then she began dialing. "Yes, I'm sorry to bother you again, Miss Smythe. . . . He's most insistent. Would you like to speak to him for a moment?" The receptionist held the phone out to him.

Charles snatched it from her. "Elizabeth?"

"What are you doing here Charles? I don't want to see you."

Charles gritted his teeth. "Don't you think we owe it to each other to make one last effort, to see if we can sort things out?"

"No, I don't. What's to sort out? You betrayed me. You lied to me. You showed me who you really are. I can't trust you anymore, and what is a relationship without trust?"

"I think if you gave me a chance to explain, you'd understand my motives and then you wouldn't feel like it was such a betrayal. And I didn't actually lie to you; I just didn't tell you everything."

"That's no better! It's *worse* because you plotted with my mother behind my back to manipulate me!"

"One more date, then you'll never see me again, I promise."

Elizabeth sighed. "I don't know. I don't know what to say."

"Say yes."

At that moment another young man stepped up to the receptionist's desk.

"May I help you?" the receptionist asked.

"Yes, I'm looking for Elizabeth Smythe, could you please call her for me?"

"You, too? She's a popular girl!"

"What do you mean me, too?"

Charles had already turned in astonished disbelief to stare at the young man standing next to him.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth answered Charles over the phone: "OK, I'll be down in a minute." Then she put down the phone.

The receptionist took the phone from Charles as he handed it absently back to her. He could do nothing more than gape at the man standing next to him. Nicholas wasn't at all as Charles remembered him. When they'd first met almost two years ago, Nicholas had been little more than a boy fresh out of high school. Now he seemed like an entirely different person. He was more confident, stronger, taller, bigger, more at ease with himself and his surroundings. Charles felt that now he may actually be looking at some serious competition.

Becoming suddenly aware of Charles's scrutiny, Nicholas turned to look at him, and shock registered just as instantly on his face. "What are you doing here?" Nicholas asked, his expression darkening as though a cloud had abruptly cast a shadow over his face.

Charles shook his head in disbelief. After a long moment, he quietly said, "I was just about to ask you the same question."

Chapter 16

Elizabeth waited with a frown for the elevator to reach the lobby. She wasn't sure what she was doing, but in the midst of losing both Charles and Nicholas one after the other, and add to that the news of her family's upcoming move—to Canada of all places—her life had been cast into sudden disarray. She felt so uncertain, tossed about in a storm of circumstances and problems beyond her control, that it would be nice to see a familiar face, to even for a moment allow herself to hope that just one of those problems could be resolved. She didn't see how, but she supposed there was no harm in letting Charles attempt to explain himself.

When the elevator doors opened to let her out, the sight that confronted Elizabeth was so shocking that she almost let the elevator close again before she stepped out. There, standing at the receptionist's desk were two young men, both of them familiar. One of them was obviously Charles. The other was just as obviously a ghost. That was the only way it could be. She watched as Charles shook a bunch of roses in Nicholas's face, while Nicholas hoisted him onto tip toes by the lapels of his sports jacket and looked about ready to hit him in the face. Charles seemed oddly intimidated by this and was leaning away from Nicholas. They were yelling at each other while the receptionist stood to one side, looking frazzled.

"You're the one who overstepped a line!" she heard Nicholas say. "You had no right to keep Elizabeth away from me; that was her choice to make! And you took it from her!"

"You're as daft as you look, you classless rube! Love isn't about what's fair. It's a war, and I won!"

Elizabeth took an uncertain step forward, starting toward the confrontation with her heart hammering in her chest. She wondered what on earth was going on, and how it was even possible that Nicholas was there. He should have been in Angola! But here he was in Cape Town, in civilian clothes—shorts and a t-shirt. It was like something out of a dream, or a nightmare.

"Yeah you won," Nicholas went on, spitting his words in

Charles's face. "And that's why I was kissing your *ex-fiancée* in Siesta while you were . . . *where* exactly were you then?"

Suddenly Charles took a swing at Nicholas with the hand that was still clutching the roses. Nicholas ducked and hooked his leg behind Charles's feet, giving him a mighty shove at the same time. Charles went sprawling to the floor. He sat there stunned and glaring up at Nicholas.

The receptionist was already skittering behind her desk. "I'm going to call security if you two don't leave right now!" she said in a tremulous voice.

Nicholas turned to her with a smile. "I'm sorry. I don't want any trouble. We'll go."

While Nicholas had his back towards him, Charles bounced to his feet and launched himself at Nicholas.

Elizabeth saw it all happening as if in slow motion. Neither one of them had noticed her yet, but now she called out, "Nicholas, behind you!"

The sound of her voice so shocked him that he turned to her rather than to the approaching threat. "Elizabeth!" he called out with equal parts joy and astonishment.

Then Charles ran into him, crushing him against the receptionist's desk before tackling him to the ground. He quickly trapped Nicholas beneath him and they warred for a minute, wrestling with each other. Nicholas had Charles's wrists clutched in his hands, and Charles was clearly struggling to break free and punch him in the face. Then Nicholas twisted Charles around, and in a moment, was on top of him, still holding both of his wrists. The tables were turned.

There were rose petals everywhere. The receptionist had the phone pressed to her ear and was already speaking into it in an urgent voice. Elizabeth rushed forward and stopped beside them. "Stop it right now!" she screamed.

Nicholas abruptly let go of Charles and held his hands up, palms open. "Charles," he said reasonably. "This is stupid."

Charles shot Elizabeth a twisted grin that she thought for a foolish instant he meant as an apology, and then he turned back to Nicholas and aimed a quick jab for his jaw. Nicholas grunted in surprise as Charles's fist found its mark. Charles cried out and held up a shaking hand, staring at it in astonishment and horror while Nicholas gritted his teeth against the pain. Elizabeth watched Charles flex his fingers wincingly. "I think you broke my bloody hand!"

And then the lobby doors burst open and a pair of security guards rushed in to haul Charles off Nicholas. They had his

hands behind his back in seconds, but Charles was squirming and yelling as they manhandled him. "Oi! Let me go! Do you have any idea who my father is? Let me go, God damn you both! My hand is broken you idiots! He broke my hand! I'll sue you if you don't let me go!"

Either the mention of Charles's father or his broken hand caused the security guards to loosen their hold on him and settle for shoving him toward the door.

"You broke your own hand because you hit him in the face!" Elizabeth yelled after him.

"It's not so bloody simple, Princess! He provoked me! You should have heard the things he was saying to me!"

Elizabeth held his bitter gaze. "I heard every word! You threw the first punch, Charles and you did it when Nicholas took pity on you and let you go. I saw it all!"

"He had it coming! He goaded me!" The security guards shoved Charles out through the doors, and they swung shut behind him. She watched him struggling to turn back and say something to her. His words came muffled to her through the glass. "He had it coming, Elizabeth!"

Elizabeth turned away with disgust and sunk down on her knees beside Nicholas. "What happened? Are you okay?" she asked, rubbing his back. Nicholas was sitting on the floor, testing his jaw by carefully opening and closing his mouth.

He turned to her and grinned, but he quickly winced as the expression upset his swelling jaw. "I am now," he said slowly.

"How did you get here?" she asked. "You're supposed to be in Angola!"

"They signed a tweety."

"A what?"

Nicholas frowned and tried again. "A tweety."

A slow smile spread across her face. "A tweety, huh?"

"Yes, a tweety," he repeated. "Don't you weed the news?"

"Well, sometimes I *read* the news," she said, nodding seriously, "But I certainly didn't weed anything in the newspaper about a tweety." She couldn't help the laughter that bubbled from her lips.

"It's not funny," he said, still lisping.

"No," she said. "You're right. I'm sorry. Come on; let's go get you some ice." She helped him to his feet, and the receptionist gave them a wary look. "I'm sorry," Elizabeth shook her head. "If Charles comes back here, let him know he's not welcome."

"Don't worry, miss, I'll not let him past the doors."

"Good," Nicholas added. "He hit me aftwer I let him go!"

Elizabeth had to work hard to keep the smile from her face. "Yes, sometimes he doesn't know when to quit."

"What was he doing here?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "He wanted to explain himself."

"Ah . . . ?"

"Don't worry, I didn't invite him."

Later on as they were leaving the lobby with Nicholas still clinging to his half-melted bag of ice, he led her through the parking lot and proudly showed off his new car. Realizing that it meant a lot to him, she marveled at it appreciatively, but truth be told she couldn't care less about such things.

"There's not a scratch on it," he said, running his hand along the front fender. It was gleaming a sky shade of blue.

Elizabeth nodded and smiled. "Yes, it is very shiny, isn't it?"

Nicholas shot her a grin. "Let's take it for a ride."

He drove her around the city while they talked. Since it was a Saturday, the traffic was light, and driving was a pleasure.

"So, you don't have to stay in the military for another year?" Elizabeth asked, anxious to confirm her suspicions.

"Nope," he said, casting her a happy grin. "I'm free as the breeze for the first time in ... well forever."

"And . . . now what?"

"I thought you might have already guessed. I've enrolled at UCT. I start the week after next."

"You're joking!"

"No."

She wanted to hug him, but he was driving, so she settled for grinning at him instead. "I can't believe it! Prayers do get answered, don't they?"

He sent her a quizzical look. "What do you mean?"

"I was praying you wouldn't have to spend another year in the military and that they'd let you out early."

Nicholas smiled dubiously. "Well, that is either a coincidence. . . . or an answer to prayer." He knew his mother had been praying along similar lines, but he doubted that God would direct the course of wars and politics for the sake of one couple, or for a worried mother, but he didn't voice his doubts.

Nicholas drove them south to Hout Bay and from there over Chapman's Peak Drive on the way to Noordhoek. The road was winding and daringly carved out of the side of steep mountains. It was a stunning cliff side journey with many convenient lookouts to stop and admire the view. At one of the first of such stops, Nicholas parked and they got out of the car to sit on the rocky ground and admire the infinite blue sprawl of ocean crashing

against the rocks far below. There on the edge of the cliff they sat and talked until the sun sunk low against the horizon and set the scattered puffs of cloud glowing with luminescent threads of golden light.

"I still can't believe it," Elizabeth said, her voice muffled against Nicholas's chest as they sat wrapped in each other's arms, their backs propped against the front wheel of Nicholas's car. "It's like a dream. I can't believe you're here."

Nicholas smiled. "Yes, it is. The very best kind of dream. It's a dream come true."

She smiled up at him. They kissed long and passionately, pushing aside the doubts and fears which had come to crush their spirits in recent days and weeks. Now with all of those things out of their way, they felt for the first time in forever that the road was clear ahead and that they were in control. They could see their future as clearly as the distant line of the horizon. There were no more obstacles in their way.

Nicholas was reminded in that instant of a song, not just any song, their song: *I can see clearly now, the rain is gone. I can see all obstacles in my way . . .* But something whispering in the back of his mind told him not to declare victory quite yet. Charles might be out of the picture, but when Nicholas really thought about it, there was someone else who had opposed them just as determinedly, and there wasn't anything they could do to take *her* out of the picture. Nicholas realized with a sigh that he was going to have to sign a treaty of his own.

"What is it?" Elizabeth asked, having heard him sigh.

He smiled down at her. "No, nothing. I was just thinking about what's to come."

She smiled back at him. "Me, too."

Chapter 17

Constance was not happy. Seated on the couch across from her was Charles, and he looked equally miserable. Constance knew that her daughter had made the most foolish mistake of her life. It was one she would always regret, but now there was no longer anything to be done about it.

Constance shook her head. "Elizabeth has finally done it! She's created a mess for herself that not even I can clean up."

"Perhaps the mistake was in trying to interfere at all," Charles said. "Despite our best efforts, she's made her choice, and in part, we're to blame for that. I fear our actions have ultimately brought about the very thing we sought to avoid."

Constance snorted. "Don't tell me you've come around to see things her way now."

"No, but she has a right to be angry. As do I, and I'm afraid that her wounded pride and mine will ensure that we never get back together. She's chosen Nicholas over me, and no amount of you or I trying to convince her that she's made a mistake is going to work. She'll simply have to discover the truth of that for herself, and that will take time. By then it will be far too late to wish that she'd chosen differently."

"Yes, I fear the same," Constance said taking a thoughtful sip of tea. "Are you sure you can't at least try to win her back?"

Now it was Charles's turn to snort. "What, and compete with that classless rube? I think not. No—" He shook his head. "—it's an insult to my pride and character for me to even consider it. Elizabeth made her bed; now she'll just have to lie in it."

She sighed. "Well, let me know if you do change your mind."

"Of course, but it won't happen. I'll be leaving for England as planned, one week from now."

Constance distracted herself by selecting a biscuit from the tray she'd set on the coffee table between them. Almost disinterestedly she said, "If that's what you truly want . . ."

"It is."

She sighed again. "Then I wish you the best of luck in your endeavors. My daughter will one day see the fool she's been and

regret her mistake. Maybe then . . . well, who knows?"

"Sometimes life gives us a second chance, even a third, but there's rarely a fourth. It's over. If and when Elizabeth comes to her senses, I'll already be happily married to someone else."

"Well, time will tell, I suppose," Constance replied carefully. She wasn't willing to give up. Not yet. But she had to admit that things looked grim. Somehow Nicholas always had a way of showing up at exactly the wrong time. *Like a bad penny* . . .

* * *

"I'd love to take you out tomorrow, Lizzie, but I can't."

"Oh?" she asked and poked him playfully in the ribs. "You have some other pressing commitment? Your other girlfriend insisting you spend time with her?"

Nicholas grimaced and looked away as her words hit uncomfortably close to the mark. They were in the park, sitting together beneath the shade of a tall jackal berry tree. They had spread their picnic blanket beneath the tree and sat down to eat their deli sandwiches and watch the people go by. Most of those in the park out enjoying the sunny weather were mothers with their kids. It was Friday, lunch time, and the park was only about half as busy as it would get by tomorrow afternoon when everyone was off work.

"You have me worried with that silence . . ." Elizabeth trailed off. They hadn't talked about whether or not their relationship was exclusive. She had more or less just assumed that it was, but they'd never actually dated exclusively. That was a serious step toward marriage that in years past neither one of them had felt quite ready to take, but now that they would be able to see so much more of each other, it seemed like an appropriate time to discuss it. Nicholas was still worryingly quiet, so Elizabeth tried to steer the conversation in the direction of her concerns. "I'm not sure I like the idea of us dating other people, Nicholas. I think maybe we've grown beyond that, don't you?"

He turned to look at her, giving her a reassuring smile. He reached out to stroke her cheek. "Don't worry, it's not that. I can't stand the thought of you dating anyone else either."

"Oh, well then . . . what is it?"

"The reason I can't go out with you tomorrow is that I've been invited to a wedding. It's Cathy's wedding."

Elizabeth frowned. "Cathy . . . ?"

"Hepburn. Denise's older sister. I mentioned it in Siesta."

"I see, but I don't remember. And Denise will be there?"

"Yes, along with her family and friends."

"And you were reluctant to tell me because . . . you still have

feelings for her." It wasn't a question.

"No!" Nicholas was taken aback. "I didn't want to tell you because I didn't want you to get jealous over nothing, but I can't hide things from you, even if I'd rather not explain them."

"Good, because I'm sick of people hiding things from me."

"Then you're not mad?"

Now it was Elizabeth's turn to look away. "Of course I'm not mad. You're free to go."

The icy current of disapproval was plain to hear in her voice, and Nicholas reached out to take her hand. "Hey, it's nothing to be jealous about, okay?"

"I'm not jealous."

"Okay . . . then why are you upset?"

"I'm not upset either."

Nicholas frowned, but he decided to leave it at that. His continued insistence that she must be mad seemed to be making her madder despite her insistence that she wasn't either mad, jealous, or upset. *Women!* he thought, as if that should explain everything. He tried to put himself in her shoes, and decided that he would probably be upset as well, but there wasn't much he could do about that. She would just have to realize that she could trust him. Trust was earned, and the best way to earn it, was to be put in compromising situations and come out of them without having yielded. *Right?* Besides, it wasn't as though she hadn't done the same, and worse, to him. Nicholas remembered his visit with her in Wellington. How Charles had made a third wheel of himself the entire time. She'd already explored his limits when it came to jealousy.

"And what about Denise?" Elizabeth asked suddenly.

Nicholas cocked his head. "What about her?"

"Is she dating someone?"

"She was, but I don't think she's dating anyone right now."

"I see."

"She broke up with him and decided to rather attend UCT."

Elizabeth frowned. "She's at UCT? I haven't seen her."

"You probably won't recognize her, it's a big university."

"Yes, but Tugwell isn't, so I expect I'll bump into her soon."

"No - she lives in the same apartment building as me."

Lizzie raised her eyebrows until they disappeared beneath her bangs. She discreetly withdrew her hand from his. "I see."

Nicholas immediately regretted his blatant honesty, but it was too late to sugarcoat it. "Elizabeth . . ." he said, making a grab for her hand again. She didn't elude him, but neither did she respond. "It's not like that, really, she lives with her sister."

"I suppose you chose to rent there because she was there?"

"No, Liesbeeck Gardens is the cheapest apartment that's anywhere close to the university, buses and the train station."

"Of course."

"Hey!" Nicholas shook his head, grinning at the ridiculousness of it all. "You can trust me, Lizzie. I'm not like other guys. You know that. And even if I were, Denise and her sisters have always been more my childhood friends than anything else."

Elizabeth shook her head. "All I know is here we are about to start a serious relationship and you're living in the same building with two of your ex-girlfriends, one of whom is a gorgeous blonde girl. How am I supposed to feel about that?"

"I admit I wouldn't like it either, but I'll introduce you to them soon, then you'll see there's nothing to be jealous about."

"Yes, I'm sure we'll get along famously," Elizabeth replied dryly, once again withdrawing her hand from his.

"Elizabeth . . ."

She looked away. "Let's talk about something else."

He frowned, but realized that now was not the right time to continue the discussion. "Okay."

Nicholas made a few light-hearted attempts at conversation, but it quickly became apparent that Elizabeth was still upset. She asked him to take her back to her residence straight after lunch, making the excuse that she had some chores to do, but he knew the real reason was much simpler.

With a sigh and a short peck on the lips, they parted company, and Nicholas went back to his apartment. He thought about going to visit Denise in the hope that he might be able to get her on side to help him defuse Elizabeth's jealousy, but then he had a sudden premonition about two jealous women instead of one, and he decided to leave things be for a while. Maybe he'd have a convenient opportunity to discuss it with Denise tomorrow at the wedding.

Nicholas sighed, feeling worried. It was amazing how a happy relationship could be so quickly threatened. He tried to reassure himself that it wasn't serious. He'd had to deal with jealous girlfriends before. It was a familiar problem. All he had to do was reassure Elizabeth that she was being silly, and that neither he nor Denise had any romantic feelings left for each other, but would she believe him?

* * *

The church was so full it was hard to see an empty seat. Nicholas stood beside the groom. Denise beside her sister - her family in the front row of the church on the left-hand side. To the

right of the aisle were the groom's family and friends.

The ceremony was beautiful, elaborate—a traditional wedding that must have cost the Hepburn family a small fortune to put together. He was happy for Cathy. They'd also dated for a brief time, but it hadn't lasted long, and it had been a long time ago. Since then, she'd been nothing but a good friend to him, while he and her younger sister Denise had gone on to strain the limits of yet another good friendship. Nicholas cast Denise a sideways glance now—standing there beside her sister in a frilly peach bridesmaid's dress, her blonde hair cascading to her shoulders in a wavy curtain, her skin flawless and pale, and her figure subtly emphasized by her dress. It was hard not to remember how he'd fallen for her. She saw him looking at her, and smiled coyly at him. As he smiled back at her, he remembered all the happy memories they'd shared. Yet as attractive as she was and as fond of her as he was, he just couldn't think romantically about Denise or any other girl. Elizabeth had grown to embody his romantic interest so completely that other girls had simply ceased to interest him, as though she were the only girl in the world. For him, he realized, that was probably very true. *Now if only I could get Elizabeth to understand that—to accept it*, he thought.

He could understand why Elizabeth was upset. Here he was with two of his ex-girlfriends, both of whom he still maintained as friends, and both of whom now went to the same university as her and lived in the same apartment building as him. It was an awkward situation to be sure, and he was certain he wouldn't like it one bit if the roles were reversed, but there had to be some way to set Elizabeth's mind at ease.

He considered that dilemma all through the ceremony, worrying his lip. *There just had to be a perfect way to solve this dilemma?*

Chapter 18

The reception hall was already crowded by the time he got to it. Denise had gone ahead with the rest of the bridesmaids to help seat the guests and make them feel welcome. The hall was decorated brightly with tall bouquets of flowers at the center of each table. White silken table cloths draped each table, and matching chair covers were tied with pastel blue bows around the backs of the chairs. There was already a band setting up on stage, and the wooden dance floor was waxed to a mirror-smooth finish. Nicholas was lost for a minute amidst the milling crowds until Denise came up to him with a broad smile.

"Hey there, looking for something, handsome?"

"Hey, gorgeous, where do I sit?" he asked, scanning the hall.

"Right next to me, of course" she said, taking him by the hand and cast a coquettish grin over her shoulder as she led him on to their table. There was a place marker with his name on it embossed in gold print. To the left of his chair was another marker with her name. Denise squeezed his shoulder and said, "Sit, I'll be back soon." He pulled out his seat and sat down.

Before Denise returned, her mother, Loraine, came to sit on the other side of him and quickly engaged him in conversation. They knew each other well. Loraine Hepburn had been friends with his mother since before he'd been born. Soon they were laughing and grinning as they swapped stories with one another. Nicholas tried to keep the theme of his stories to his air force experiences rather than the more recent developments between him and Elizabeth. He felt somehow that it would be inappropriate to mention Elizabeth to Loraine, since she had always been such a stalwart fan, of him - for her daughter.

But then all those efforts became wasted when Loraine insisted he tell her about his love life. Making matters worse, Denise came to sit beside him just as he was explaining.

"It seems like every time circumstances or misunderstandings force us apart, something else forces us back together. Like two magnets. It takes an effort to keep us apart. It's becoming rather uncanny now," Nicholas said.

"Yes," Loraine said, nodding, "that does seem unusual." Nicholas had just told her about his reunion with Elizabeth in Siesta and about some of the manipulation and deceit which had gone into separating them in the first place.

"What did I miss?" Denise asked with a slight frown.

Loraine hesitated to reply, while Nicholas turned to her and neatly summarized what he'd just told her mother.

"So you and Elizabeth are back together?" Denise asked, a smile beginning at the corners of her mouth.

"Yes, although she's rather mad at me right now."

"Why, what happened?" Loraine asked.

"Well, she heard that I was invited to Cathy's wedding—" He turned to address Denise "—she realized that, of course, you would be here, too, and then she got rather jealous – of you."

"Oh . . ." Denise trailed off. "I suppose I can understand that."

"Yeah, but there's more . . ." Nicholas trailed off with a frown.

"Nicholas Strauss, what *have* you been up to?" Denise asked, her green eyes twinkling at him.

"No, it was nothing I did. Something I said."

"And what was that?"

"I might have mentioned that we live in the same apartment building and that you're going to the same university, too."

Denise sighed. "All this fuss over me! I'm flattered."

Nicholas shot her a rueful grin. "I'm at your ego's service, m'lady." He gave her a slight bow from the waist.

She laughed lightly. "I'm sure there's something we can do to put her mind at ease, Nicholas ..."

Nicholas raised his eyebrows "Really, what could that be?"

"Let me think about it."

"Okay, any help would be appreciated," he said with a sigh.

Loraine poked him in the ribs with her elbow and gave him a conspiratorial wink. "Women! We do complicate life, don't we?"

Nicholas laughed. "I'm glad to hear one admit it. Perhaps there's hope for the species yet."

"Well, just remember, there's a difference between complicated and crazy."

Nicholas shot her a wry grin. "Oh?"

"If a woman is ever driving you crazy, chances are, since *you* aren't crazy, she is. Avoid the crazy ones Nicholas," she said with a nod, a knowing gleam in her eyes. "Life's too short to be driven to distraction by a woman, no matter how much you love her."

"I'll try to keep that in mind, Aunt Loraine, although I feel like there might be a flaw in your reasoning."

"Oh?"

"What if she succeeds in driving me crazy? Then I really will be the crazy one," Nicholas explained with a wink and a smile.

Loraine smiled. "Well, I hope you don't ever let it get that far."

* * *

"Good advice doesn't come cheap, Edwin, but bad advice is free; just remember that. Be suspicious. These men are our competitors, after all, they won't reveal their secrets willingly."

"Yes, I imagine they won't," Edwin said, bending down to pluck his golf ball from the hole with a white-gloved hand.

"Well, I'm sure you'll get everything out of them one way or another. If you weren't the best man for the job, I wouldn't be sending you. But the company is at a busy time in its life cycle, and you're also the only man we can spare."

Edwin wasn't sure whether to be flattered or insulted. *Busy*, he thought wryly. *Is that what you call it?* The company was in financial ruins from its takeover of Sharp Electronics—so much so that construction of the tannery they'd planned to open in Paarl had come to a dead standstill. The half-built complex was a grotesque skeleton of concrete, bricks, and rebar, and there was no telling when, if ever, it would be completed. He was glad now that the company hadn't decided to make him the managing director of the new tannery. By now he'd have been replaced in Wellington and out of a job in Paarl.

"Come," the chairman said, wrapping his arm around Edwin's shoulder "Let's go and get a drink before you go home."

"I should probably tell my wife that I won't be back for dinner."

"Of course," the chairman said as they climbed the slight rise to the clubhouse. "I'll wait at the bar while you call her."

When they entered the clubhouse, they parted company while Edwin went to the reception desk to make his call. Constance wasn't amused, but when she heard he was with the chairman, she simply told him to keep the man happy and avoid any personal discussions. He should keep his relationship with the chairman as professional and superficial as possible. Edwin couldn't agree more. There was always something about the chairman's eyes that made him feel ill-at-ease—watched.

When Edwin found the chairman at the bar counter, the man was already ordering his second drink. Whiskey, as nearly as Edwin could tell. He pulled up a chair. William turned to him with a unsettling grin. "So, Eddie boy, what's your poison?"

"Ah, I'll have a beer," he said, directing his comment to the bartender and pointing to one of the brands they had on tap. The bartender gave him a nod and a moment later he slid a frosty mug filled to overflowing across the counter top.

“Good,” William said, nodding and raising his glass for a toast. They clinked glasses briefly. “Now, let's discuss business.”

* * *

The dancing and merriment at the reception were interrupted as it came time for the bride to throw the wedding bouquet and for the groom to throw the garter. Nicholas and Denise, who'd been dancing together, parted with a smile and stood waiting while Catherine and her husband, Leon, ascended the stage. Leon called into the microphone for the crowd's attention. When everyone had quieted down, he ordered the women to assemble on the left of the dance floor, the men on the right.

Denise turned to Nicholas and said, “Watch me—I have a plan!” The crowd separated. The bride smiled and turned her back to them. She counted to three then launched the bouquet high over her head. It tumbled in the air a few times above the crowd of women. There were squeals of anticipation as their eyes tracked the bouquet, and then the few women nearest to the projected landing sight jumped to catch it. One hand rose above the others to seize the bunch of flowers, while a dozen others clawed to snatch the bouquet away. A group of them tumbled to the dance floor and lay there struggling in a pile of colorful dresses. Nicholas smiled as he watched all this from the leading edge of the assembled groomsmen. The bride turned around with a big grin to see who had caught the bouquet, but she had to wait a moment before the struggling stopped and the victor emerged. Nicholas watched as Denise bounce back onto her feet, with the flowers clutched triumphantly in her hands. She shot him a quick smile as a few disgruntled women climbed to their feet, dusting themselves off. Nicholas smiled his approval. She batted her eyelashes at him, a sly grin appearing on her face.

The groom called for attention once more, and Nicholas turned to see Leon go down on one knee to remove Cathy's garter. He stood with the garter in hand, his eyes scanning the eager crowd of men below, then he turned his back to them and tossed the garter over his shoulder. Nicholas lazily reached up with one hand to catch it, while the guys around him jumped high in the air and fought with one another to get closer.

No one was more surprised than Nicholas when the delicate lace garment fell neatly into his upraised hand. His fist closed instinctively around it before anyone could snatch the garment from him, and then he held it up before his astonished eyes. He caught Denise staring at him from across the room, her eyebrows raised. He shrugged and then held the garter up for everyone to see. Nicholas could see the bride cast a knowing look first

towards her sister, Denise, and then to him. Leon cleared his throat and asked the victors to come up to the stage. Denise and Nicholas made their way up the stage from opposite sides, and then turned to stand before the wedding guests with smug grins. Leon placed a hand on their shoulders. "A fine couple, wouldn't you say? I think I hear wedding bells for these two!"

The crowd roared its agreement. The tradition being that whoever caught the garter and whoever caught the bouquet would be the next to marry. It said nothing of them having to marry one another ... but that was definitely the conclusion everyone was drawing, for they all knew about them having been childhood sweethearts. Nicholas caught a smile from Denise's mother, Loraine, and he returned it uneasily. He felt like Fate was playing games with him again. There was so much history involved in all of this, and all of them already felt like his family.

Later on, as the festivities went on, Nicholas and Denise both took a break from the dancing to sit down together and talk.

"So," she began. "Kind of funny what just happened, right?"

"Yeah . . ." Nicholas said. "Quite a coincidence, considering."

Denise caught his distracted tone. "You're still worried about Elizabeth being jealous of me, aren't you?"

Nicholas turned to meet her gaze. Reluctantly, he nodded. "I'm at a loss—I'm not sure how to show her that she has no reason to be jealous of you, that you've actually championed her cause."

Denise pursed her lips, thinking. "I think I have an idea."

"Oh?" He cocked his head curiously.

"Come on," she said, and held her hand out to him. He took her hand and promptly led him towards one of the exits.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To visit your girlfriend, Elizabeth, in Tugwell hall of course, silly!" she said, as if the answer should have been obvious.

Nicholas felt a sudden stab of dread. *This can't be a good idea*, he thought. *These two ladies who know so much about each other, and me, finally meeting—I'm not sure I'm ready for this!*

Chapter 19

The phone was ringing insistently in Elizabeth's apartment. She left the bathroom and went to answer it, assuming it must be her parents come to visit her, or perhaps a friend? "Hello?"

"Miss Smythe, there's a young couple here to see you—"

Elizabeth heard a familiar voice interrupt the receptionist. "We're not a couple."

"Oh, I'm sorry—not a couple—would you like to see them?"

Elizabeth's forehead furrowed. She thought the voice that had interrupted the receptionist might have belonged to Nicholas. "What are their names?"

Elizabeth heard the receptionist asking the visitors for their names, and then came the reply: "Nicholas and Denise."

Elizabeth's reply caught in her throat. A dozen angry thoughts flooded her mind. So Nicholas wants to introduce the two loves of his life to one another. Was he crazy? She had no desire to meet Denise—not now, not ever. How could he be so stupid?

"Should I send them up, miss, or will you come down?"

"Neither. I don't wish to see either of them."

"Oh . . . well all right, then. I'll tell them."

Elizabeth threw the phone back onto its base. It landed awkwardly and hung half on, half off. Elizabeth glared at it as if it were a living thing—the bearer of bad news. She felt her anger and indignation rising. She'd been mad at Nicholas before tonight but now she was furious! What was he thinking?

"I'm sorry, but she doesn't wish to see anyone right now."

"Oh?" Nicholas asked, his eyebrows beetling and his smile fading. "Did she say why?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Ah . . . well . . . thank you."

Denise took his arm to turn him away from the front desk. "I guess she's still upset. Don't worry, she'll get over it, but . . ."

"But what?" Nicholas inquired.

"It really would be better if I had a chance to talk to her. I'm sure I could set her fears to rest. I think I know how she feels."

"Well, she doesn't want to see us, so that'll have to wait now."

"Yes . . ." Denise cast a quick look over her shoulder. The receptionist was leaving her desk. They watched her disappear around the corner. "But just watch me do it anyway!"

"Oh no, that always means trouble!" he said, and with that, Denise ran for the staircase on the far side of the lobby.

He was tempted to call after her, but suddenly he understood what she was doing, and he didn't want to draw attention to her. She was going to insist on seeing Elizabeth anyway. He smiled crookedly and silently wished her luck on her mission.

Then a doubt formed in the back of his mind, and his smile faded to a frown. Denise could just as easily sabotage his relationship with Elizabeth as she could mend it. Which was she rushing off to do now? If Denise were secretly jealous as well, this could go very badly for him. After all, if his relationship with Elizabeth were somehow broken up, who better to pick up the pieces than his old childhood sweetheart? Nicholas frowned, suddenly wanting to go and stop Denise, but then he remembered all the times she'd helped him instead.

He'd already taken a few steps toward the stairs when a voice called out to him: "I'm sorry sir, no men beyond the first floor."

Nicholas turned and gave the receptionist a rueful grin. "Right, I almost forgot, sorry." With that, he left the building and went to lean up against the wall beside the doors while he waited for Denise to return. His eyes found the full moon just as a cloud passed in front of it and cast the night into a world of darting shadows and sinister silhouettes. He felt those shadows seeping into his thoughts. What was Denise saying to Elizabeth right now? *I'm just going to have to trust her.*

Elizabeth was just sitting down at her desk, doing her homework when the knock came at her door. She frowned. "Now what?" she asked aloud as she crossed the room to her door. Since the front desk hadn't notified her of any other visitors, this one person had to be living in the building. *Dilly maybe?* Elizabeth wondered as she opened the door.

Elizabeth did a double take when she saw the beautiful blonde woman standing there, dressed as a bridesmaid, holding a bridal bouquet. *So this is Denise!* Elizabeth's brow furrowed and her mouth hung open in awe and a failed attempt to speak.

"Elizabeth?" Denise asked. "May I come in, please?"

Elizabeth was tempted for a moment to slam the door in the young woman's face, but she refused to be shown up as the immature, petty one. "Yes, please do . . ." Elizabeth said.

"This is for you—from me and Nicholas." She thrust the small bouquet of roses out like a shield, and Elizabeth accepted it.

"I know you said you didn't want to see us, but I just had to see you. We really have some important things to discuss."

Elizabeth shook her head and forced a smile. "I'm just tired, and I have a lot of work to do. I hope I didn't give any offence."

"No, of course not . . . I suppose you already know, but I'm Denise," she said, with a friendly smile, holding out her hand.

Elizabeth shifted the bouquet to her left hand and briefly shook hands with her—"Elizabeth . . . It's nice to finally meet you, Denise. I've sure heard a lot about you through the many years."

"Likewise . . . a lot more than I would have liked," Denise said, shaking her head, smiling. "You know something. Elizabeth?"

"No, what?"

"You're really beautiful! Nicholas was right about you."

Elizabeth's brow furrowed. "Thank you . . ." Of all the things she'd expected from Nicholas's ex, a compliment wasn't one of them. "So are you, Denise . . . I really mean that," she replied, her smile less forced. "I can understand why Nicholas was so taken with you. I've always been envious of natural blondes, like you."

Denise returned Lizzie's friendly smile. "You know Nicholas is really worried that you're jealous of me—but you needn't be."

Elizabeth shook her head. "I'm not jealous, I'm just . . ."

"You are, and that's normal. I don't blame you, because I'm jealous of you too. Nicholas is one of a kind—he just doesn't know it. You won't find another guy like him easily, in this world, or if you do, I'd suppose you'll be a pretty old maid by then."

"I'm not sure you singing my boyfriend's praises is helping me be any less jealous, Denise," Lizzie replied, feeling uncomfortable.

Denise's smile broadened. "He and I have always been sweet on each other, but lately we've been friends more than anything else. Often I thought, as we grew up, that we'd become, well, more like you and him are. So did our moms. But then one Christmas, four years ago, he met you, and when he came back from that summer vacation, I knew it wasn't ever going to happen, not unless you really blew it. I'd never seen him so happy, and at times, so sad. I've never seen any girl, myself included, capture his heart and mind the way you have. What I'm trying to say Elizabeth, is . . . treat him well. You're a very lucky girl."

Elizabeth nodded. "I know I am Denise . . . and I will."

"Take a look at that bouquet I gave you," Denise said, pointing to it "Do you know what it is, and why I gave it to you just now?"

"It looks like a bridal bouquet . . . is it?" Elizabeth asked.

"Yes, tonight my sister threw it, and I caught it." Denise replied "But do you want to know something really strange?"

"What?" Elizabeth asked, somewhat curious.

"Nicholas—your Nicholas, caught the garter. Everyone cheered us on, thinking what a lovely couple we were—that we should be the next to get married." Denise said, and then continued "But Elizabeth, I could see where Nicholas' heart and mind was, and it wasn't with me. He was worried about you, here, all alone."

"Really?" Elizabeth said, somewhat incredulously at the news.

"Yes. So I took him by the hand and walked him over here to see you—rather than to stay dancing with me. He doesn't even know what I'm doing or saying to you here now, and knowing him, he's probably down there sweating," Denise laughed.

Elizabeth looked at the bouquet "Why would you do this?"

"Because it's very clear to me that Nicholas loves you, he always has, you know. I could tell that after the very first time he met you, and I was jealous of you, Elizabeth—very jealous and envious. He tried to hide his feelings - he did that pretty well most times. We stayed close, but I knew then, it was all about you."

"I'm so sorry Denise. I never set out to hurt you—it just happened. I can't quite explain it all away. Nicholas always talked very well of you. He thinks you're the sweetest lady in the world," Elizabeth said. "And he told me that the thing he dreads the most is that one day he may hurt you, break your heart, and he wasn't sure how he could ever deal with that. He felt so bad about that!"

Denise leaned over putting her hand on Lizzie's arm "I know—that's what makes him special," she said "And that's why I decided to look out for his best interests and happiness, too, not just my own. That's where you come into this picture, Elizabeth. If you play your cards right, Nicholas will be yours forever. He'll love you loyally for life. He'll never cheat on you, I'm sure of that!"

"Thanks, Denise. I feel a lot better now that I've met you, and heard you explain everything," Elizabeth said, looking at her.

"Good. And I want you to know I'm not going to stand in the way, or interfere between you two. It was my idea that he visit you in Wellington—I insisted, when I could just as easily have stopped him. If I can do anything to help you, please let me know."

"Thank you, Denise. That's very kind of you, considering"

"But," Denise held up a finger in warning. "If you hurt him, if you somehow break his heart, Elizabeth . . . don't think for a minute that I'll let you get away with it, or that there won't already be a long line of girls waiting to take your place!"

"I see. And I suppose you'll be in that line?"

"Yes, I'll be the *first*," Denise said, her green eyes twinkling.

Elizabeth's eyes narrowed to icy blue slits. "Is that a threat?"

"Not at all," Denise said, shaking her head, smiling as she reached out and put her hand on Lizzie's shoulder, giving it a

gentle reassuring squeeze. Elizabeth held Denise's gaze for a wary moment before Denise finished: "It's a promise!"

"I see. So I suppose I'd better watch my steps, then?"

Denise shrugged. "No more than any other girl who's snagged herself a really good catch. You'd do the same in my place."

"Yes . . . I probably would" Elizabeth conceded.

"Friends?" Denise asked. "I hate having enemies."

Elizabeth pursed her lips, hesitating a moment before giving a quick, shallow nod. "Friends." Elizabeth wasn't sure she meant it, but for now it seemed a better idea to keep her competition close, where she could be watched—not out of her sight.

"Well, I'll let you get back to your work. We need to get back to the wedding reception. Is there anything you'd like me to say to Nicholas from you?" Denise asked, already backing away to leave.

"Yes." Elizabeth smiled. "Please tell him to come by tomorrow and we'll go out for a lunch date."

"Okay, I will. I know him well. He'll be happy and relieved!"

Elizabeth watched with an uncertain frown as Denise said goodbye and left the room. That last part was a test. She resented having to use Denise as a courier, but if Nicholas didn't show up for lunch tomorrow, she'd know whether or not she could trust Denise. Right now she felt like her fears and jealousy had been justified, but also that she'd underestimated the threat that Denise presented. Denise was a beautiful woman—tall, blonde, green-eyed, with all the right curves in all the right places . . . but worse than that, she was vivacious and self-confident! Not at all the type of girl Elizabeth liked to imagine around her boyfriend, staying in the same building as him! But she couldn't very well tell Nicholas to stop being friends with Denise and her sisters. She watched Denise disappear around a corner in the hallway. With a big sigh, Elizabeth turned and shut the door. She set the bouquet down on her dressing table and went to lay on her bed, staring at the ceiling. If it wasn't bad enough that her mother was interfering, now she had Denise to worry about as well! Elizabeth let out a big sigh. *Would things ever be easy for her and Nicholas?*

* * *

Nicholas watched the doors open and Denise come outside into the moonlight. Her hair instantly caught the silver glow of the moon and shone a blazing white. She was no longer a young girl. She was a beautiful woman! She approached him with a smile. "So? What did you two talk about?" Nicholas asked nervously.

"Oh, girl stuff, you know. I tried to set her mind at ease. She was suspicious at first, but I think I mostly succeeded."

He saw Denise's free hand. "You gave her the bridal bouquet?"

"I did . . . now she and you are next in line to marry."

"That was very sweet of you," Nicholas said. "So . . . that's it?"

Denise laughed. "Yes, silly—what did you expect? That we were going to fight over you, or something?"

"No . . . well, maybe—I didn't really know," he admitted.

Denise laughed and her hand found the curve between his shoulder and biceps and squeezed. "You really worry too much!"

"Well, good to know I was worrying for nothing," he replied.

They started walking back to the hotel to rejoin the wedding party. "Did Elizabeth say anything about me?" he asked.

"Oh yes!" Denise said. "I almost forgot!" she said, grabbing his arm again. "She told me to tell you to meet her here for lunch tomorrow. That she expects you to take her out on a date."

Nicholas smiled. "Perfect! I guess everything is forgiven, then?"

Denise rocked her head from side to side, smiling and rolling her eyes. "Well, you know us women, we take our time to let things go. You're just going to have to work at reassuring her!"

Nicholas laughed, relieving the tension "That's for sure!"

"Well, I'm sure she'll be back to her usual self by tomorrow."

Here's hoping . . . He thought. He still had an uneasy feeling about what had passed between Denise and Elizabeth, like maybe Denise wasn't telling him everything. Maybe he should ask Elizabeth tomorrow what they'd talked about . . . But then he shook his head. *No, probably better not to remind her why she was mad.* He'd be able to tell pretty quickly tomorrow whether or not she was holding any grudges. He let out a big sigh.



Denise and Nicholas (1976, Photo from the Kathy's wedding)

Chapter 20

A few weeks later Elizabeth was at the airport with her mother and sister waiting for her dad's flight to come in to the airport. He was coming back from his most recent business trip. They were all planning to go out to lunch and discuss it together. Elizabeth was at a loss as to what they had to discuss. Why did her dad's work suddenly involve all of them? She didn't see why the discussion involved her or Hattie, but she decided to forget about it and focus on the fact that soon she'd be seeing her dad again. It was a rare event that they all went out to eat together as a family.

They waited at the arrivals gate and watched as the first man walked out, wheeling his luggage behind him. They studied the faces of all the subsequent travelers coming off the plane, looking for a familiar grin and those slightly slanted eyes for which Edwin's side of the family was famous. The flight was arriving from Johannesburg, where Edwin had a chance to sleep the night, before flying down to Cape Town. Even so, the flight to Johannesburg from New York the day prior had been 17 hours long, so he was bound to be tired.

Elizabeth was the first to see him. Her eyes locked with her father's and they traded grins. Then Constance noticed him, too, and began moving to intercept. Elizabeth and Hattie trailed slightly behind their mother as she went up to their father and greeted him with a quick kiss.

"So?" Edwin asked of Elizabeth. "How have you been?"

"Good," Elizabeth replied, smiling broadly. Hattie seemed to sense that the question wasn't directed at her, and kept quiet.

Edwin nodded and slipped out through the cordon to join them in the arrivals lounge. He checked his things briefly and then they all started off together. Elizabeth matched her steps to her father's and kept pace on one side of him, while her mother kept pace on the other.

"So, dear," Constance said, "I trust everything went well?"

"Yes," he nodded quickly. "It was a successful trip."

"Good, good. I'm glad to hear it."

Elizabeth felt a frown forming. "What was the trip about?"

"Ah . . . well, we'll talk about it over lunch, Lizzie."

"Okay . . ." She was sure she was missing something. Her mother was smiling broadly. That was strange enough by itself.

When they were all seated at a nearby seafood restaurant, Elizabeth thought to raise the subject again. "So, what was so successful about your trip, Dad?"

"Well—" He cut himself off by taking a sip of water. Elizabeth waited, watching as he lowered his glass carefully, then cleared his throat. Whatever he was working up to, Elizabeth wasn't sure she was going to like it. She noticed her mother was smiling again. Now Elizabeth was starting to get a bad feeling.

"What is it?" Elizabeth asked.

Edwin pursed his lips. "Well, apart from my official business, I took the opportunity to go up to Canada and visit a man who's offered me a job managing one of his tanneries."

Silence. Elizabeth felt like she should say something, but her thoughts were all shouting at her in a confusing jumble of unanswered questions. Eventually she managed to silence most of them to ask just one: "And? What did he say?"

Edwin frowned. "Well, it would seem the job offer is still open. He's given us until the end of this year to move."

Elizabeth was aghast—speechless. Hattie seemed to be preoccupied with the menu. As for their mother, she was still smiling. "Well, that's very generous of Mr. Colton. I'm sure we can all manage to move by then."

"Yes," Edwin said. He directed his attention to the menu, as though there were nothing more to say about the matter.

But Elizabeth had plenty more to say, and she couldn't keep it to herself any longer. "So we're moving, then? Just like that? No family discussion?"

Constance turned to her with a look of strained patience. "What do you think this is? Your family? No—it's *my* family!"

"Well, *I* don't want to move, and I know Dad doesn't either."

Edwin seemed to shrink behind his menu.

Constance pursed her lips, narrowing her eyes as she seemed to loom across the table toward Elizabeth. "Since when do you speak for your father, girl? Learn to know your place!"

Edwin cleared his throat and reached out a hand to grasp Constance's arm. "Let's not argue, dear. I'm tired and I'd like to enjoy my lunch without getting indigestion."

Constance rounded on him, harrumphing, and said, "Tell your daughter that! I'm not the one having a childish tantrum."

Edwin frowned and held his wife's gaze for a moment before turning to Elizabeth in silent appeal.

"I'm not going!" Elizabeth said.

Constance laughed scornfully. "You act as though you have a choice in the matter Elizabeth – well, you don't!"

"That's not fair, Mother! It's my life, too. I have a right to make my own choices."

Constance laughed again and shook her head mockingly. She began studying the menu as if the conversation were over.

"Well, I think it sounds exciting!" Hattie said, but no one so much as glanced at her.

Elizabeth sat back in her chair with her arms crossed. When the waiter came to take their orders, Elizabeth shook her head. "I'll just have water, thanks."

"And to eat?" the waiter pressed.

"Just water."

"Okay . . ." The waiter went on to take Hattie's order.

Constance was glaring pointedly at Elizabeth, but Elizabeth refused to meet her mother's gaze. "Order something to eat, Elizabeth," her mother demanded.

"I'm not hungry anymore – I'll watch you eat."

Edwin sighed meaningfully.

"Don't ruin the day for everyone just because you're in a snit," Constance said. "You're such a selfish little girl." Constance turned to the waiter as he was leaving. "She'll have the same as me." The waiter's eyes darted to Elizabeth—she still had her arms crossed, and now she was half-turned away from her family. The waiter nodded once and left the table.

"Elizabeth," Edwin implored. "We'll discuss this again later, don't worry. It's by no means final."

She turned to him then and took a moment to let her eyes bore into his before she shook her head. "There's just one thing I don't understand. You told me you didn't want to move. And you know I don't want to move either. So why are we moving?"

Edwin cringed at her words. "We'll talk later," he insisted.

"No," Constance said, her tone somehow icier than it had been before. "We're going to talk now. What have you two been discussing behind my back? Here I've planned for us all to go out to lunch and discuss things *together*, but meanwhile you've already been discussing things privately, without my input. May I ask why I've been excluded from these discussions?"

"Dad doesn't want to leave, neither do I" Elizabeth said simply.

"Edwin?" Constance demanded. "Are you going to let your daughter speak for you? Or are you going to act like a man?"

He sighed once more. "I'm not thrilled with the idea, but I admit you make some good points for why we *should* move."

"That's a fine way to dodge the question. Do you want to move to Canada or don't you?"

"I think we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's first start the immigration process and see where that goes. It may be that they don't let us into the country, in which case, all of these discussions are moot."

"And if they do let us in? What then?"

Edwin shrugged. "We'll cross that bridge when we get there."

"Mmmm," Constance replied. "You sound quite indecisive, and yet when we talk in private you always agree with me. I think you're just trying to support your wretched little daughter." Constance turned to look at Elizabeth. Elizabeth was hurt by her mother's words, but she tried not to let it show. "You need to learn to know your place, Elizabeth. I'll not warn you again!"

"Or what? Am I not allowed to voice my opinions now, or ever? Fine I'll keep quiet, then."

"Yes, you *should* learn how to hold your tongue. You realize, of course, that your sole reason for wanting to stay here in South Africa is not only flawed but incredibly foolish."

"Oh? And what do you think is my reason?"

"That boy, Nicholas, for whom you so carelessly threw away a bright future with Charles."

"He's not my only reason."

"Isn't he? I beg to differ. I think he is. And what's more, he's a very poor reason at that."

"Nicholas is no longer a boy. He's the best man I've ever dated, and I'm not going to let you convince me otherwise."

"Then you're a fool, because it's staring you in the face. Tell me, girl, has he ever, even once, after all these years made his intentions clear to you?" Elizabeth hesitated.

"No, I didn't think so. You've always been his summer fling, and that's not about to stop now. He'll go on dating you along with every other girl who'll give him the time of day."

Elizabeth shook her head. "He won't. We're exclusive now."

Constance laughed. "I suppose you were the one to suggest that the two of you date exclusively?"

Elizabeth frowned. "What does that have to do with it?"

"Everything! When a man can't be forthright to get what he wants, he'll lie for it."

Elizabeth shook her head. "Nicholas is not like that."

"Well, tell yourself whatever you want to believe, but at least Charles was man enough to declare his intentions honorably. He proposed to you. What has Nicholas done? I suspect if you pressed him hard enough, you'd discover that he has no plans for

a future with you. He's a young, foolish little boy, far from being ready to settle down with anyone. You'll soon see that I'm right when you find him cheating on you with another girl."

Elizabeth's mouth opened to reply, but she was so shocked by her mother's accusations that she couldn't speak.

"Yes, I can see that you know I'm right. It's written clear as day all over your face. Unfortunately, you seem to possess a powerful talent for self-deception, so like it or not you'll have to discover it the hard way."

Elizabeth snapped out of it, shaking her head. "You're wrong." Constance gave a short yip of laughter. "No, my girl, you are, but enough of this foolishness. Let's enjoy our lunch, shall we?" She turned to Edwin with a smile. "A lovely day, isn't it?"

"What?" He asked, sounding dazed. "Oh, yes, quite lovely . . ." Elizabeth shook her head, turning back to the view behind her so she wouldn't have to look at her mother. *She's wrong about Nicholas*, Elizabeth thought. But then she remembered that incident with Denise a few weeks prior, and she wondered about her mother's comment. *"You'll soon see that I'm right when you find him cheating on you with another girl. . . ."*

But Nicholas isn't like that! she insisted to herself. *And his intentions are honorable!* She was fuming quietly all throughout lunch. For her father's sake she decided to force herself to eat, but every bite of her fish was like sawdust in her mouth, and somehow, no matter how hard Elizabeth tried to forget the doubts her mother had raised about Nicholas, she kept hearing them echo inside her head. What if her mother was right? [[Nicholas, 15y after wedding #1 of 3](#)]



Chapter 21

Nicholas could tell something was bothering Elizabeth, but she refused to tell him what it was. She'd been like that, cool and distant—preoccupied—for days. Ever since her father had returned from his business trip last Sunday. Nicholas had grown tired of asking Elizabeth what was bothering her and always getting the same answers: *I'm just tired. I have a lot of work to do. It's just stress I suppose.* He wasn't buying any of it.

It was Sunday afternoon. Nicholas decided to take her along Chapman's Peak Drive again. The scenic winding cliff road high above the Atlantic gave him the perfect opportunity to drag the truth out of her. She had nowhere to go. No way to escape his questions. "So, how was your week?" he asked.

"Fine," she said.

"Just fine?"

"Mmmhmm," she replied as her gaze slid out to the sparkling blue ocean far below the mountain road.

Nicholas sighed and decided to try a more direct approach. Subtlety was not working for him. "Well, that's good. . . . Nothing you want to talk to me about?"

"Like what?"

"Well, ever since your father came back from his business trip, you've been worried about something, but for whatever reason, you don't seem to want to tell me what ... " He gave her a quick glance before he was forced to turn his eyes back to the road.

Elizabeth studied him silently for a moment, and then she bit her lower lip and looked away again. "It's just—"

"It's not school," he interjected. "What's bothering you, Lizzie?"

"Ahm . . ." Silence reigned once more.

Nicholas counted to ten, waiting for her to continue. When she didn't, he pressed for details. "come on, what is it?"

"Can we stop somewhere?"

"Sure . . ." It took them five minutes to reach the next lookout. Before she could get out, Nicholas was there to open the door for her. She smiled and thanked him as she climbed out.

"So?" he asked.

"So . . ." she said and walked up to the edge of the cliff to admire the view, looking down at the Atlantic ocean below her.

He came to stand beside her, and despite his anxious need to know what she was thinking, he held his tongue to let her speak first. It was a few long minutes before she finally spoke, and when she did, it wasn't at all what he'd been expecting.

"Where do you see yourself in five years, Nicholas?"

"Well," he hesitated. "I see me graduated, working somewhere, married, and studying for a master's degree. Why do you ask?"

She turned to him with a wan smile. The sunlight brought out honey-brown highlights in her hair and framed her face in a soft glow. "And who do you see yourself married to?"

Nicholas was caught off-guard, but he wasn't naïve enough to miss what she was really asking. "Well," he began. She looked up at him, her eyes searching his carefully. He went on, "I was kind of hoping it would be you. You've always been my choice, you know that Lizzie – I want no other choices ... just you!"

She smiled wryly and cocked her head to one side. "Only kind of hoping? You don't sound too sure of yourself now."

Nicholas slowly shook his head. "It's really up to you - I've never been unsure about my feelings for you, Lizzie!" The effect his words had on her was immediate. Her cheek flushed red while her eyes widened and drifted shyly from his. He took her hand and then he lifted her chin and drew closer until she had nowhere else to look but at him. Their lips brushed softly and then they kissed until it seemed that the sun had set and drawn long shadows across their world. When they drew apart their sense of time was restored and they noted the sudden darkness was only a cloud that had drifted in front of the sun.

"So much for my plan to date you for the next ten years and then only surprise you with a ring and a proposal. I guess I'll have to accelerate things a bit now." He said, winking at her.

Elizabeth laughed and punched his arm. She gave him a look of mock outrage. "You'd better!" She said holding up her fist and looking for a soft spot to aim the next blow.

Nicholas grinned and held up his hands in mock surrender. "Okay, okay you win, dearest lady! I'll compromise ... 7 years."

She took a threatening step toward him and he enfolded her in a fierce hug, trapping her arms to her sides to prevent her from hitting him. "And now what are you going to do, Sweetie?"

"Sweetie, huh? I'll show you just how *sweet* I can be . . ." She strained in vain against his vice-grip around her arms.

He chuckled into her ear. "You may as well give up and just let me hug you. It'll be easier for everyone that way."

Then she kicked him in the shins, and he jumped back from her. "Hey! Ouch!"

She put a hand to her mouth to stifle a laugh. "Sorry." Her apology was ruined by the laughter that was now spilling uncontrollably from her lungs. He struck such a comical pose—bent to rub his shins and staring up at her in disbelief. Feeling suddenly sorry for him, she took a few steps toward him. "Shall I kiss it better?"

"I think that's the least you could do."

"Sorry, you left me no choice."

"Apparently that wasn't wise."

She laughed again at his wounded tone.

Sitting down on a rock at the edge of the cliff, they admired the vast ocean view spread out before them, their feet dangling over the edge. Elizabeth took his hand and began playing with it, lacing her fingers through his over and over again. Nicholas waited before asking the question that was on his mind.

"So that's what's been bothering you? Wondering whether or not I see a future for us – for you and me, together?"

"What makes you think something has been bothering me?" she asked, still playing with his hand.

"Come on, it's obvious. You've been preoccupied and distant all week. Ever since your father came back from his business trip in fact. Did he say something about me? No, wait, it was your mother again, right? It's always her."

Elizabeth grimaced, and the time she took to give her answer was all the confirmation Nicholas needed. "I knew it!" he said.

"It's not that simple."

"Oh? How so?"

"On his business trip my dad went to Canada for a few days to visit a man who's offered him a job there. I think we really might be moving, Nicholas. In no more than a year's time, probably sooner if my mother gets her way."

"What? What about your father? What does he think?"

"He doesn't want to go. I think he's trying to find every way he can to avoid it without actually being firm and saying no."

"So he's afraid of your mother."

Elizabeth hesitated. "I think he's just learned how to deal with her. It's easier to work around her than to argue with her or try to make her see your point of view."

"Hmmm."

Elizabeth turned to him. "What?"

"Well, I guess we'll see what happens, then, but there's no sense worrying about the future."

"If you don't plan for the future, it will catch you by surprise. If you fail to plan, you plan to fail. Or at least, that's what my mother always says. . . . and she's always planning!"

Nicholas smiled at her. "I didn't say don't plan for it, I said don't worry about it. The worrying part is unproductive. You get into a trap of thinking everything will go wrong and even your best plans will fail - the sky is going to fall, so oh what's the point of planning anything anyway? Worry paralyzes you."

"I guess . . ."

"So, what did she say?"

"Well, pretty much what she's always said - that your intentions aren't honorable, that Charles' were, that he'd proposed to me, that we've only ever been a summer romance, you and me, and that you'll never change that - that it's not going to simply stop now. She said you're not ready to settle down or be in any serious relationship, and that I'll catch you cheating on me one day with another girl, maybe even Denise?"

Nicholas was left staring at Elizabeth in shock. "That's really mean of her Lizzie! Did you say anything in my defense?"

"Of course I did! I denied all of it, but then I had to admit to myself that you've not made your intentions clear - other than in play-acting in our secret place, and for a brief moment I saw a mental image of you and Denise kissing, and I felt like crying. I bought into her thinking, started to wonder about us"

Nicholas shook his head. "Elizabeth, you do know what my intentions are. What's more I just told you. And as for Denise, we're good friends, but we don't have the same kind of bond that you and I do. I think she made that rather clear to you?"

She gave him a level look. "Are you sure? It seems to me that the best relationships are built around strong friendships."

Nicholas laughed at the absurdity of it all. He took her face in both of his hands and kissed her. "You and I are good friends, too! Best friends, in fact. That's one of the things I love most about us. We sit and talk for hours and don't get bored. We can do anything, or nothing, and it's all just the same, because we're happy just to be together, and unhappy when we're not."

She smiled. "Yes, that's true, I must admit I hate being apart."

"So, let's not confuse things. But . . ." He began nodding slowly. "With your family planning to leave and everything in your life being so uncertain right now, I want to be sure that you know there's one thing in your life you *can* count on." Nicholas waited for his words to sink in. Elizabeth was looking at him expectantly, waiting for him to go on, so he did: "Me. Elizabeth, you can count on me, and just so that you know I'm not going anywhere, so that

there will not be any room left for the slightest doubt about my intentions, I do have something to say to you, but first, to be sure, can I ask you a question?"

Elizabeth nodded. "Of course."

"Where do *you* see yourself in five years?"

Elizabeth smiled. "About the same as you. Married. Working somewhere. Maybe thinking of starting a family."

"And who do you see yourself married to?"

Elizabeth hesitated, her smile fading to a more serious look. "Well, I had begun to hope that it might be you ..."

Nicholas grinned. "That's all I need to hear. Elizabeth, I've never been more sure about anyone in my life. If I don't end up marrying you, I'm not sure I'll ever get married. Apparently you feel much the same, so what exactly are we waiting for?"

Elizabeth blinked slowly up at him. "Are you . . ." She shook her head. "Are you asking me to marry you?"

"Well," he said, "It's kind of unconventional – but what about our love has been? I don't even have a ring yet. Do you mind?"

"No, I mind about what you feel – and what you promise me." Elizabeth said "The other things are just window dressing."

He grinned and his green eyes seemed to sparkle at her.

"I'm glad to hear that Lizzie, because that makes everything possible!" He said, turning towards her and taking her hands in his. He cleared his throat and made sure that they had eye-contact. Then as the pale pink and orange hues of the setting sun illuminated their surroundings - with the waves rolling in relentlessly on the ocean far below them, Nicholas spoke.

"Elizabeth, I love you! I always have, and I always will. Please would you consider pledging your love to me forever, and agree to be my wife?" As he proposed, he saw tears forming in Lizzie's eyes. She made no attempt to wipe them away. He didn't either. Instead, for an agonizing moment, he held his breath.

Chapter 22

Elizabeth was in shock. The echoes of Nicholas's proposal were racing through her mind and she hesitated, considering her reply. Less than six months ago she'd been engaged to Charles, now Nicholas was proposing to her! It didn't seem like enough time for her to even catch her breath, let alone decide to marry someone else! Yet somehow all of that seemed like a lifetime ago, and Charles had no lingering hold on her heart. Once she realized that, she knew what her reply must be.

Sensing her hesitation, Nicholas smiled and took her hand. "Just say yes."

She grinned. "Of course I want to marry you!"

"So that's a yes?"

She nodded, smiling broadly. "It is, but . . ."

He stood, pulling her up, spinning her around in a fierce hug. She grinned in his arms. "Put me down!" she said, laughing.

He did, then belatedly he seemed to recall that she'd said 'but' and he gave her a curious look. "But? ... but what?"

"I was going to say there's something you need to do first." He cocked his head and she went on, "You need to ask my parents for permission to marry me."

His jaw dropped. "You're joking!"

She shook her head. "I wish I were."

"But ... don't you think that's an old-fashioned tradition?"

"Yes, but my parents are big believers in traditions. Don't worry, you won't be asking my mother for permission, just my father, and he's never had anything against you."

"Well," he said, running a hand through his hair. "I guess that's reassuring at least."

"So you'll do it?"

He sighed. "Of course."

She smiled and leaned forward to drop a quick kiss on his cheek. "Thank you."

"On one condition," he said, holding up his index finger.

"What's that?"

"Let's surprise them. Make plans for us to go see your parents

next weekend, but don't tell them what it's about."

"Okay . . . ?"

"I don't want your mother to guess why we're coming and then convince your father that I shouldn't be allowed to marry you."

I see. You know, Nicholas, as much as she protests about you, deep down, my mother just has my best interests at heart. If you find some way of showing her that you really do love me, I'm sure she'll come around."

"Well, I can't think of any better way of doing that than asking for your hand in marriage, can you?"

"I guess not. I suppose that should get her off our backs."

"Let's hope so. . . ." Suddenly he started laughing.

"What is it?"

"I don't have a ring yet! Your mother's not going to approve!"

She smiled up at him and placed a hand on his chest. "That's not important, and she'll just have to accept that's how I feel."

"It doesn't seem right. Like maybe I cheated," he said.

Elizabeth laughed at that. "There was never any wrong way to propose to me, Nicholas – I'd have said yes anywhere, anyhow."

"Well, it's not quite how I planned to do it, that's all."

"So you *were* planning to propose to me!"

He shrugged. "Well, in about ten ... maybe seven years."

"Don't start that again. . . ." she said, a warning note in her voice. At that they both burst out laughing.

"Well, here's hoping your father has such a good sense of humor about all of this."

"Oh, I'm sure he'll be easier to win over. Just speak from the heart. Tell him how you' feel, how you've always felt about me."

"Yeah. So, since I don't have a ring for you yet, and since I no longer have the element of surprise, how would you like to go shopping for your engagement ring with me? Say Friday, before we go visit your parents?"

"It's a date," she whispered in his ear.

At that point there was no more keeping them apart. Their hands entwined, and their lips met. This time the shadows which fell around them weren't from clouds, but from the sun dipping below the craggy line of cliffs and trees. A chill wind swept down from the mountains, sending them scurrying for the shelter and warmth of Nicholas's car, whereupon they started the trip back. Nicholas returned her to Tugwell Hall with just a few hours to spare before her midnight curfew, and they bid one another farewell until tomorrow.

Nicholas drove back to his apartment with a broad grin and a light heart. He felt sure he'd never been so happy in all his life. Of

course there was still one obstacle which was not to be underestimated: Elizabeth's parents. He hoped she was right, that her father didn't have anything against him. If not, he was about to find out in the worst way possible. It briefly crossed his mind to buy a gift for Edwin, but he decided that it might be taken the wrong way. No, he would have to convince Edwin of his love for Elizabeth with words alone.

He hoped that would be enough.

* * *

The following weekend arrived far too soon for Nicholas's liking. He felt like it was the day of his final exams, and he hadn't studied nearly long enough or hard enough to pass. He found it strange that he had to ask Elizabeth's parents for permission when Elizabeth herself had already agreed to marry him. Hers was the only approval that interested him. So *what* if her parents didn't like the idea. It wasn't their choice to make. He felt like going to ask for their permission was a tacit admission that the choice was somehow theirs. Was that how Elizabeth saw it?

He glanced away from the road to see Elizabeth admiring the engagement ring she'd picked out for herself yesterday. It was a beautiful but small diamond on a gold ring. Not particularly expensive, but it had been plenty expensive for him. Nicholas had gone first to the bank to ask for a loan to buy the ring, only to be rejected. Apparently they didn't take good grades and a promising future career as security for a loan. After that, he'd called his parents with the good news of his engagement. They were thrilled. When he mentioned he didn't really have the money for a ring, he hadn't even had to ask his dad. Johann had simply offered, asking, "How much do you need?" Nicholas had quoted a modest sum, and his father had wired it down to him the next day. Now with the ring taken care of, there was just one minor detail remaining: Elizabeth was adamant that her parents should give their approval for the engagement.

Nicholas frowned out at the road, squinting against the glare of the sun. The highway was shimmering with heat. It was the end of summer, but still hot as ever in the Western Cape. Soon the dense suburbs of Cape Town gave way to vineyards. The vines marched right up to the fences in long, orderly lines, like soldiers assembled on the parade ground. And there, far off in the distance, one could see the hazy blue line of the Haweqwua Mountains against the horizon. Nicholas considered that under any other circumstances it would have been a beautiful morning for a drive, but under present circumstances, he certainly wasn't enjoying it. Every mile they traveled brought him closer to a

horrible sense of impending doom. He tried to tell himself not to exaggerate, to trust Elizabeth's assurances that everything would be fine, that her father wouldn't be opposed to them marrying, but he noticed that Elizabeth was getting more and more nervous the closer they got to her home. By the time they were driving through Paarl, she was alternating biting her lip and nails.

Nicholas spared a hand from the steering wheel to pull her hands from her mouth. "Relax!" he said, laughing with false bravado. "It'll be fine."

She seemed embarrassed to be caught. "I know," she replied.

"So what did you tell your parents about why we're going to visit them?"

Elizabeth smiled at him. "I said we have a surprise for them."

"That's it?"

She nodded.

"Well, I suppose a surprise could mean a lot of different things . . ." Nicholas said, but he wasn't too sure. Constance was a smart woman. She would wonder why they were coming to visit together, and what surprise they could possibly have planned. It seemed to scream *marriage proposal* to Nicholas, but maybe he was just being paranoid.

* * *

"What could they possibly be coming to tell us? You mean you have no clue, Edwin? You must have some idea!"

Edwin frowned, watching his wife pace up and down the living room. "Well, I suppose I could guess."

"Yes, yes, and what's the first thing that comes to mind?"

"Umm . . ."

"Ummmm?"

"Well, I don't know! I suppose maybe Elizabeth received some sort of commendation at school."

"Then why bring Nicholas?"

"She doesn't have a car."

Constance pursed her lips, considering the matter for a minute. "No, that's not it," she decided, shaking her head. "This is something else."

"Such as?"

Constance held his gaze for a long moment without saying anything, and then she turned away and went up to the living room windows to stare out at the backyard and pool.

Edwin sighed quietly. He was used to his wife being mysterious and getting worked up over nothing, so he didn't press her for details. She'd elaborate on her thoughts in good time. . . .

"I think they've come to tell us they're wanting to get married,"

Constance said.

Edwin found himself incapable of uttering so much as a squeak of protest. At last, when he'd recovered enough from his shock to speak, Constance turned from the window to impress upon him the certainty of her prediction. "You know what you must do, Edwin."

He shook his head. "*Marriage?* There must be another explanation."

"There isn't. You'll see, but when Nicholas comes to ask for our permission to marry Elizabeth, you cannot give it to him under any circumstances."

Edwin frowned, taking a moment to gather his thoughts. "Why not? He seems like a nice enough boy."

"A nice enough boy?" Constance harrumphed. "Are you sure we're talking about the same young man?"

"If he can prove to me that he really loves Elizabeth, and if she wants to marry him, who am I to say no?"

"Who indeed. Perhaps we should find another more suited to the task." Constance turned her back on him and returned to her window-gazing. "We're leaving for Canada in less than a year, Edwin, and you have to ask me why Elizabeth shouldn't marry Nicholas? I should think it obvious."

Edwin's frown deepened. It was true. He'd already gone to see the Canadian Embassy with his wife to ask about them immigrating. Things were looking depressingly hopeful. Canada was welcoming trained professionals from South Africa, particularly those with solid job offers waiting for them. His children would get in as dependents. It seemed like there was nothing to stop them from moving to Canada *tomorrow* if they could sell their home and cars by then. In fact, Constance had already taken the liberty of calling several estate agents. He had his back to the wall, and there wasn't a whole lot he could do to prevent the move, apart from putting his foot down and demanding his veto rights. He hoped it wouldn't come to that. . . .

"Are you listening to me, Edwin?"

He came back to the present with a shake of his head. "What? Yes, of course."

"Good, then I trust you don't have anymore doubts about what you should do. Heaven forbid that our daughter should marry Nicholas and then he ends up keeping her here while we all move to Canada. I won't stand for it, Edwin! Do you hear?"

"Yes, no, of course, we won't allow that to happen."

"Good." With that, Constance stalked off to the kitchen and Edwin was left contemplating her words, wondering if she was

right, if Nicholas and Elizabeth really were coming to announce their engagement. It seemed like such a short time after she'd been engaged to Charles. Surely she wouldn't be engaged again so soon? He supposed he'd find out soon enough.

* * *

Nicholas parked on the street in front of Elizabeth's home, and then they walked up to the front door holding hands, both in a show of unity and for emotional support. They reached the front door, and Elizabeth hesitated for a moment before knocking. Nicholas gave her hand a squeeze. "Don't worry, it'll be fine."

She turned to him with a pale face and wide, worried eyes. "You promise?"

He chuckled. "Shouldn't you be reassuring me?"

"Oh, yes, that's right. I forgot." She knocked on the door and they waited.

The door opened after just a few seconds, and Constance stood before them with a frown.

"Hello, Mother," Elizabeth said.

"What was so urgent that you couldn't tell us over the phone?" Constance demanded.

"Well . . . uhh . . ." Elizabeth turned to Nicholas.

He forced a grin. "Good news is always better told in person."

"Mmmm." Constance's eyes flicked back and forth between them. She made no move to open the door further or to step aside so that they could come in.

Nicholas cleared his throat. "May we come in?"

"Yes, I suppose you must," Constance said, reluctantly stepping aside. Nicholas swallowed uneasily and tried to remind himself that he'd come to get Edwin's permission to marry Elizabeth, not Constance's, so it didn't matter how frosty her demeanor was. Once they were inside, they saw Edwin come strolling down the hallway to the front door. Now Elizabeth squeezed his hand. She'd probably meant the gesture to be reassuring, but his anxiety level went up, not down.

But Nicholas was pleasantly surprised to see Edwin stop in front of them with a broad grin. He even reached out and squeezed Nicholas's shoulder as though they were old friends. "Well, well, it's good to see you both! I hear you have a surprise for us?" he asked Elizabeth.

"Yes," she said, nodding uneasily. "We do." With that, she turned to Nicholas expectantly. Edwin followed the gesture and soon all eyes were on Nicholas.

He smiled and cleared his throat. *I guess that's my cue.* "Perhaps we should all be seated first?"

Constance crossed her arms. "Why don't you put us out of our misery and suspense now, and we can discuss it afterward."

"Well . . ." Nicholas directed his attention to Edwin. They held one another's gaze for a moment. Edwin was still smiling encouragingly. The difference between his attitude and his wife's was marked! Nicholas couldn't help but wonder if maybe they had guessed his and Elizabeth's purpose in coming to visit after all.

"Yes?" Edwin prompted.

Nicholas went on: "The surprise is that I've come to ask for your daughter's hand in marriage."



Elizabeth, (1977) just before travelling home to have Nicholas ask her dad's permission to marry her, his daughter. It's clear to see Lizzie's blissfully happy, filled with love and hope! An important part of her and Nicholas' Christmas-eve wish was now poised to come true, and it sure seemed that the young couple's love was set to grow from strength to strength, but not if Constance could stop it!

Chapter 23

Constance spoke first. “Oh, I see,” was all she said.

Edwin spoke. “Why don't we go and discuss this in my office?”

Nicholas nodded, and Elizabeth watched her father guide him down the hallway. Once they were gone, she turned to her mother to look for her reaction. Constance wasn't smiling, and her arms were still crossed. She regarded Elizabeth silently for a moment, and then, with a smirk, she said:

“Well, you do move on quickly.” Elizabeth opened her mouth for a reply, but her mother was already on her way to the living room. “Come on then,” she called over her shoulder. “Let's set out some tea and biscuits. I'm sure your father won't be long.”

Elizabeth started after her mother, wondering whether that was a good thing or a bad thing.

* * *

“Sit down, Nicholas,” Edwin said, pointing to a chair in the corner of his office.

Nicholas dragged the chair over in front of Edwin's desk while Edwin opened a cabinet behind him and pulled out a carafe of brandy along with two glasses. He slid one glass across the desk to Nicholas and poured him a drink. After pouring himself a matching glass, he stoppered the bottle and set it to one side. “Now . . .” Edwin sat down and spent a moment cradling his glass between his hands while he stared at Nicholas.

Nicholas made no move to take a sip of the brandy, and he met Edwin's gaze openly, though as the silence wore on between them, he began to grow nervous.

Then Edwin spoke: “Why do you want to marry my daughter?”

Nicholas took a breath and ran a hand through his hair. “Well, she's unlike any other girl I've ever met, Mr. Smythe. I've been in love with her since the first day I met her, when you and Mrs. Smythe offered to give me a ride back to Siesta, though no one ever took our love very seriously. I can't imagine marrying anyone else. She's all I can think about, dream about, talk about . . . everything I do, I do for her—for the future we'll hopefully someday share. I rather suspect that's how you felt about your

wife too, many years ago.”

Edwin paused for a moment, remembering how he’d gone to ask Constance’s dad for her hand in marriage—and had been refused.”

“I see,” he said. “You make a compelling argument. And what about your studies? Have you thought about how you’re going to provide for her?”

“Well, I’m getting straight A’s.”

“And what are you studying?”

“Computer science,” Nicholas replied.

Edwin frowned. “Computers hey?”

“It’s a fast-growing industry. Jobs are in high demand, and they’re well-paid.”

“I see.” Edwin said. He took a sip of his brandy, and Nicholas took a moment to do the same. Edwin began nodding slowly as he set his glass back down. “I’m going to want to speak to my daughter first - before I give you my answer. Would you be kind enough to go and get her, then send her in alone, please?”

Nicholas nodded and rose from his chair. “Of course, sir.”

* * *

When Nicholas came into the kitchen, Constance expected to see him morose, his spirits crushed, but upon careful scrutiny, she saw instead that he was calm, his expression neutral.

Elizabeth saw all of the same and asked, “So? What did my father say?” Her tone was eager, hopeful.

Foolish girl, Constance thought.

“He said he’d like to talk to you alone first, Lizzie, before giving us his final answer.”

“Oh . . .” Elizabeth got up from the bar stool and started from the kitchen with a frown. “I wonder what that’s about?”

Now Nicholas was left alone with Constance. She was staring at him. He looked around the kitchen and his eyes soon settled on a tray of biscuits that was sitting on the counter. In a bit of a daze still, he went up to the tray and reached out to take one.

Constance slapped his hand away. “Not yet! Tea isn’t ready.”

“Oh,” Nicholas said, rubbing his hand. “Sorry, I should have asked first - I’m a little distracted. Can I help you with anything?”

“No, go take a seat in the living room. I’ll be out shortly.”

Nicholas left the kitchen in a hurry, no doubt grateful for the excuse to leave. Constance found herself staring after him, and then beyond him to the hallway which led to Edwin’s study. She was just in time to see Elizabeth disappear inside. *What is he doing?* She wondered. He was supposed to say “no,” and that would be the end of it, but instead he wanted to speak to

Elizabeth? What did she have to do with it?

Constance shook her head irritably. She hoped her husband wasn't planning to do something stupid. Nicholas couldn't marry their daughter because they would soon be leaving the country, and there was also the matter that she was too good for him, and she'd already had better suitors—one in particular. Charles would soon realize his mistake and come running back. Constance would make sure of that. *But he can't very well do that if you're already engaged to someone else, Elizabeth!* Why she bothered to look out for Elizabeth's best interests she'd never know. She supposed that she wouldn't be such a good mother if she didn't. *Caring really can be a burden sometimes. . . .*

* * *

"... So you really love him, Lizzie?" Edwin continued.

Elizabeth momentarily held her father's gaze, to convince him of her sincerity. "I do dad. I really, really love him!"

"But are you sure you want to spend the rest of your life with him Lizzie? You know that's a very long time!"

Elizabeth smiled, her eyes sparkling. "Yes, Dad, I'm very sure!"

He smiled. "Well, I wouldn't be doing you any favors if I didn't ask. This is a big decision you know, but I suppose it's not the first time you've been engaged, though he came pre-approved."

Lizzie snorted at that thought "Then you'll give your approval?"

"Hold on, I haven't said what I'm going to do yet."

"Oh, I just thought—"

"Bring your mother and Nicholas. You all have a right to know my decision at the same time."

"Okay . . ." Elizabeth left the room slowly, uncertainly, but Edwin was smiling reassuringly. He was the one who needed to be worried. He watched Elizabeth leave and then return a few minutes later with both her mother and Nicholas.

Constance entered his office warily. She came to stand in front of his desk and glower down at him. He ignored her and turned his attention to Nicholas and Elizabeth as they came to stand to one side of his wife.

"Well, I've spoken to you, Nicholas, and then to you, Elizabeth, and I'm convinced that you're both very much in love. Whatever trials lie ahead for the two of you, I'm confident that you'll at least be facing them together. With that much understood, you have my permission to get married."

"What?" Constance blurted. "Just like that?"

Edwin shrugged. "Just like what? I've just spent ten minutes speaking to each of them in turn, but I didn't need more than two. They know what they're doing, and they have all the right

reasons for doing it. I can't imagine why I shouldn't say yes."

Constance looked like she wanted to say more, her cheeks puffing out in protest, but she held her tongue with a visible effort, and her face turned red.

By contrast, both Nicholas and Elizabeth were grinning from ear to ear. They turned to face each other, and silently shared their elation with the adoring looks they were trading with one another. Edwin smiled. Yes, he'd made the right decision. What's more, there was an unintended benefit which had only occurred to him shortly before Nicholas and Elizabeth had arrived. His wife had as much as told him that she wasn't going to leave South Africa without their daughter, and here Elizabeth was to ask his permission to marry Nicholas. In all likelihood, now Elizabeth would stay, and he had that to use as an argument against their move to Canada—or anywhere else.

Constance took one look at Nicholas's and Elizabeth's smiling faces, and then she gave Edwin an icy glare. He swallowed thickly and offered the happy couple a smile as he raised his glass of brandy for another big gulp. "So when's the wedding going to be?"

Constance's eyes flew wide and her glare became all the more intense. Edwin ignored her and focused instead on his daughter's smiling face. Elizabeth shook her head. "I don't know . . ." Turning to Nicholas, she said, "Maybe next summer?"

He shrugged. "Sounds good to me."

"Well, let's not get ahead of ourselves," Constance put in. "We might not even be here next summer!"

"True," Edwin replied, pursing his lips thoughtfully. "The wedding might need to be sooner . . ." He had to dodge another icy glare from his wife. He distracted himself by taking an innocent sip of his brandy. The alcohol was certainly helping to loosen up his inhibitions, though he suspected he'd hear all about it later. "Well," he said, standing. "Time enough for all of those plans later. Let's go to the living room where we can all get more comfortable. Perhaps you and Elizabeth would like to stay the night?" Edwin asked, his eyes on Nicholas.

Nicholas, unsure, decided to defer the question to Elizabeth.

Edwin smiled. "I won't take no for an answer." He'd need the reinforcements while his wife's temper was still cooling off.

"Sounds wonderful, Dad," Elizabeth said

"Excellent. We'll toast your engagement properly over dinner, then. Speaking of which, what is for dinner, Constance?"

Constance looked flustered. "Well, well . . . I don't know yet! I'll have to think of something – I wasn't prepared for all this."

"No hurry," Edwin replied, waving his hand dismissively. He

moved to leave his office, and the others followed him out. He felt sure that he could feel his wife's gaze boring a hole into the back of his head as they headed to the living room, but a mischievous grin touched his lips at the very thought of it. The brandy was definitely helping add levity to the situation. Giving his approval for the engagement was the last thing in the world his wife had expected after she'd expressly told him to forbid it. He remembered her quip about his backbone and smiled.

Edwin reached the living room to find a tray of tea and biscuits waiting, and he wasted no time piling a plate high with biscuits and tucking in. It seemed a crime to mix tea and brandy, so he didn't bother. The tea would likely only bring him down from his triumphant high sooner than he'd like. There was something liberating about doing the opposite of what his wife wanted for a change. He watched her stalk by on her way to the kitchen while Nicholas and Elizabeth sat down opposite him on the couch.

"Mom seems to be in a bit of a foul mood . . ." Elizabeth commented in a hushed voice.

Edwin shook his head and licked crumbs from his fingers.

"She's just having trouble keeping up, that's all. I think maybe she thought you would've taken more time to get over Charles."

"Ah, yes, she did seem to rather favor him . . ." Nicholas said, and cast a quick look over his shoulder as if to make sure Constance wasn't standing behind him. Edwin smiled. He knew just how the boy felt.

"But I favored you," Elizabeth said, turning to Nicholas and pressing her forehead to his.

Edwin smiled. Watching them together, it reminded him of himself and Constance and how they'd been—once upon a long time ago. That was the other reason he'd decided to go against his wife's wishes and give his permission for Nicholas and Elizabeth to marry—because he remembered what it was like to be in love, and he also knew exactly what it was like to be told you couldn't marry the one you loved. Come to that, Constance *also* knew what it was like. It had been her father who had forbidden them from marrying all those years ago. He'd remind his wife of that if she were being too unreasonable with him later.

They saw Constance come bustling out of the kitchen a moment later, but rather than come join them in the living room, she all but ran past them on her way to the front door.

"Going somewhere, Constance?" Edwin called after her.

"I need to get some groceries for dinner," she called back.

"Don't forget to get some more coffee. Oh, and while you're at it, a bottle of champagne to celebrate!" He grinned slyly and took

another sip of brandy. He knew he was rubbing salt in the wound. Defying his wife was more fun than he'd ever imagined possible, but he had to be drinking first in order to do it.

Constance gave no reply, but he felt sure she'd heard him. He suspected half the reason she was leaving was just to get away from them and the scene of her defeat. But she'd be back. He also suspected this wasn't the last they'd heard from her on the subject of Nicholas and Elizabeth getting married. Edwin felt a frown creeping into his smile as he took another sip of brandy. One thing he knew well about his wife, she didn't know how to lose. She never even allowed for it in all of her plots and schemes. It always came as a shock to her when she did lose, and then she simply redoubled her efforts to turn defeat into victory. She just could never be wrong on anything. She was relentless.

He turned to talk to the two love birds sitting in each other's arms. "So, that's that then. Today's the logical conclusion to a summer love affair that started for the two of you when you weren't quite sixteen yet—how do you feel now?"

"Blissfully happy, Dad!" Lizzie replied excitedly with a smile.

"Relieved and grateful—and very happy too!" Nicholas said.

"Good! Then my job is done here, and since you're not driving back today, Nicholas, drink-up, I need another before my wife gets back—Lord knows I'll need it!" Edwin said with a snort.



Elizabeth & Nicholas, Blissfully happy, swimming together.

Chapter 24

“You fool!” Constance whispered, her eyes flashing at Edwin in the darkness of their bedroom. They were sitting in bed, their backs propped up by pillows so that they could talk. “What madness entered your mind that made you think giving them your permission was a good idea? What happened to our discussion? I thought we had agreed on this.”

Edwin sighed. “When I talked to them today, I realized how genuine their love for one another is. Of course I couldn't say no. Don't you remember what it was like dear? I've stood where Nicholas was today, and you've stood where Elizabeth was.”

“That was completely different!”

“How?”

“We're moving, Edwin! We're leaving the country! And I'll not leave South Africa without my daughter.”

“Then perhaps we shouldn't go.”

Constance fixed him with a gaze designed to reach out and strangle his soul. “Is that what this is about?” she asked firmly.

“It's about love,” he said, dodging the question. “I don't think we need to complicate it any further than that.”

“But you don't want to leave.”

“I didn't say that.”

“It doesn't matter what you say.” Her attitude went from angry to incredulous. “Really, Edwin! You're such a fluttering leaf of a man! One minute you decide this, the next you've completely changed your mind to that! I can't keep up! At least make a decision and stick with it. That I can respect. But this!”

Edwin frowned deeply as he watched his wife violently fluff her pillow. “It's not like that. If you'd listened before—”

“Oh, I was listening! I've always listened. The trouble is that my ears deceive me, because they hear one thing, but then in the next instant you're saying another! Yes, that must be it. My ears are faulty. I can't have married such an indecisive whelp.”

“Constance,” Edwin said carefully, trying to keep his anger in check. “I won't have you disrespecting me—”

“It's not disrespect if it's the truth.”

"It is disrespect, and—"

"Go to bed, Edwin." Constance rolled over. "This conversation is boring me."

Edwin gritted his teeth and spent a moment staring at his wife's back with narrowed eyes and hateful thoughts spinning through his head. At last he let his anger out in a sigh and he too lay down and rolled over, but sleep seemed to dance around him with glee, taunting his fatigue in his wife's own voice: *You'll never get to sleep now!* A trickle of irritating laughter echoed in his mind, and Edwin sighed once more.

"Oh please do me the favor of holding your sighs until morning," Constance said. "Some of us are trying to sleep."

With that, Edwin got up from bed, stepping into his slippers.

"Where are you going?" Constance asked.

"To my office. I forgot I've some work left that needs doing."

"Well, don't forget to be up in time for church."

"Of course."

"What would the neighbors say if we weren't there?"

"Oh, nothing they aren't already saying anyway, I'm sure," Edwin said quietly as he opened the door.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, dear." He closed the door behind him and paced down the hallway to his study. The door creaked open and he gratefully stepped inside. As an extra measure of defense he locked the door behind him. Sighing for the third time in as many minutes, he walked over to his liquor cabinet to retrieve the bottle of brandy. It was time for another drink.

* * *

Elizabeth sat slumped in her chair, a pile of books on her desk, her chin resting on her chemistry book. Her eyelids were drooping and her mind was drifting. The professor was droning on and on. It was all a lot of unimportant gibberish to her now.

Her thoughts drifted to Nicholas, and she smiled. He had offered to help her with her chemistry homework after school. She'd reluctantly accepted his offer. It would be more fun to go out somewhere—maybe back to The Spur . . . they had a delicious burger there, *The Spur Burger*. . . . Elizabeth's stomach rumbled at the thought. It was getting close to lunch time. She glanced at her watch, tilting her wrist so she wouldn't have to lift her head from her pillow of textbooks.

11:15.

Still another half an hour before the lecture was over and she could go to lunch. She sighed. It seemed like forever! She switched her focus to what the lecturer was saying and tried to

make herself pay attention, but after a few minutes she gave up. She was thoroughly lost in the class. Whenever she tried to pay attention, her thoughts always changed directions and distracted her. Thoughts of Nicholas . . . or worries about the future . . . and there were plenty of those. Her parents were still planning to move to Canada. Her mother had taken her aside the morning after her father had given his permission for her to marry Nicholas. *"I hope you realize what this means,"* she'd said. Elizabeth had shaken her head and given her mother a bewildered look. *"If you marry Nicholas, you'll never see your father or any of us ever again!"*

Elizabeth had recoiled at that. *"What do you mean?"*

Constance had merely shaken her head and shrugged. *"We're going to Canada. Do you think Nicholas will follow us? He won't. And now that you've decided to marry him, neither will you. You'll be trading your entire family for a man who would never give up the same for you."*

Elizabeth had hesitated then. After considering her reply for a moment, she'd smiled and said. *"Dad will never leave South Africa. He has too much here to make him want to stay."*

"Oh? Well, then you have nothing to worry about, my girl."

Elizabeth frowned at the memory. Even now it was unsettling. If her family really did move . . .

Her thoughts trailed off without an answer. She couldn't imagine being separated from them. They would visit each other, of course, but it just wouldn't be the same—

The lecturer's words cut into her thoughts, and she tried to distract herself with what he was saying. *" . . . valence electrons in the outer shell. For the main group elements, only the outermost electrons are valence electrons."*

Unimportant Gibberish, Elizabeth sighed. She'd study it later.

* * *

Constance was pacing up and down the living room floor, chewing her nails and racking her brain for ideas. She needed to break off the engagement between her daughter and Nicholas. But how? Forbidding them wouldn't work, and besides, Edwin had already ruined that plan. Now she needed a more subtle way to oppose the engagement.

If I could just get her away from that boy until we leave, his hold over her would be broken. . . . but how? Constance frowned, considering the matter deeply. The trouble was that Nicholas and Elizabeth were in the same city, going to the same school, living just a few short blocks from one another. They were able to spend every available moment together, solidifying their love for one

another. It seemed like an impossible situation. *Unless . . .*

Constance abruptly stopped pacing and smiled. Yes, that *would do it*. Unfortunately, yet again it required Edwin's cooperation, but this time she knew he wouldn't dare defy her. He'd been sleeping on the couch in his office for weeks, and she could tell he was cracking under the strain of her continued disapproval. He'd already apologized twice for giving Nicholas his approval and defying her wishes. Each apology had been couched in excuses, but still, she knew he wouldn't dare to make the same mistake again.

She strode over to the phone on the end table beside the living room couch and placed a call through to Western Tanning. She reached the operator and gave her husband's extension. A moment later the phone in his office was ringing.

"Hello? Edwin Smythe, managing director speaking."

"Edwin!" Constance allowed warmth to suffuse her voice.

"Constance?"

"Yes, I was wondering if you'd like to join me for lunch."

Edwin hesitated, confused to be let out of his dog box so soon.

"Of course . . . when and where would you like to meet?"

"I'll come by the tannery. We can go from there. In an hour?"

"Sounds perfect."

"Good, see you then."

She hung up the phone, smiling broadly. It always amazed her how she managed to pull victory from the jaws of defeat. She cast a glance to the ceiling. "No one gets the best of me."

God wouldn't allow it, she thought. She always supports me!

* * *

"So what do you want to do tonight?" Elizabeth asked of Nicholas as she took a bite of her sandwich.

"Well, I thought I was going to help with your homework?"

"We can do that some other time. Let's go out tonight. I'm tired of studying!"

Nicholas hesitated, gauging Elizabeth's sincerity, and whether or not she could really afford to go out rather than study. He knew her grades had suffering lately. She'd blamed various distractions for that, but she didn't mention him, even though he knew he was her biggest distraction by far. Still, he couldn't be her mother or father, and tell her what she should or shouldn't do. He had to admit, he was sick of studying too.

"Well," he said slowly. "My friends keep asking to go out with us. Maybe we could all do something together for a change?"

"That sounds nice . . ." Elizabeth said, picking at her lunch. Then she looked up abruptly as if something had just occurred to

her. "Which friends?"

"Denise and Sandra."

"I see."

Nicholas laughed. "Don't tell me you're still jealous."

"No, it's not that."

"Well then?"

She sighed. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to get to know one's competition even better."

Nicholas laughed again. "She's not competition, Elizabeth. In fact, I don't know anyone who's more eager to see us married. Denise told me that if we don't invite her to our wedding, she'll never speak to us again ..."

"Of course she's determined to be invited! When the priest asks if there's anyone who objects, she's going to be the first one up on her feet."

Nicholas was shaking his head. He reached out to take Elizabeth's hands in his. He was smiling, his eyes sparkling at her. "Trust me," he said. "She's really not like that."

Elizabeth sighed once more. "Okay. Fine. For you."

"Thank you."

"So where are we going?"

"Well, apparently there's a band playing at The Spur tonight."

Elizabeth smiled. "Sounds perfect."

* * *

Elizabeth was in her room getting ready to go out with Nicholas and his friends when the phone rang. She walked blithely to answer it, not realizing the news that was waiting for her on the other end.

"Hello?" she said.

"Elizabeth!"

"Mom?"

"Yes, it's me. I have some . . . unfortunate news for you."

"Oh?" Elizabeth's brow furrowed. "What is it?"

"Well, your father and I were talking over lunch today and it seems we can't afford to pay for your studies anymore. The move is going to be very expensive and we need the money to pay for all the necessary arrangements."

Elizabeth held her breath. She didn't know what to say.

"Are you still there?"

Elizabeth let her breath out in a rush. "What? I don't get it. When exactly did you decide all of this?"

"Aren't you listening? I just told you. I was talking with your father at lunch today, and we're going to go bankrupt if we continue paying for your education. We can't do it anymore."

"Well, then I've just been wasting my time here! What am I going to do?"

"You can continue your studies in Canada. You'll be living at home there, so we won't have to pay extra for your lodging. Plus your father is being given a raise in his new job, so it won't be such a concern there. Just for now, until we move, we need you to come home and take a break from your studies."

Elizabeth was speechless.

"Did you hear me, Elizabeth?"

"Yes, I can't talk about this now. I have to go. I'm going out."

"Of course dear. Your father will be there on the weekend to help you move your things. Get ready to move back home."

"Goodbye, Mother ..." But Constance interrupted her.

"Oh, and one other thing Elizabeth ... your grandmother died."

Lizzie was in shock, but recovered quickly enough to inquire ...

"I have two grannies, mother, do you mean your mother died?"

"No Elizabeth, she's still very much alive, dad's mother died."

Now Elizabeth felt the tears rising up in her eyes as she started gasping for air. Her sobs of grief took hold. She was the first born, eldest grand-daughter of her favorite granny, and had spent quite some time with her. They'd developed a very close bond, and she always told Elizabeth that she was special, and had an important, family task to fulfill – to find her true love, and that when the time came for her to return to Heaven, she'd inherit her engagement ring ... that it had special powers to help her find her true love and then, to marry him, even if against all the odds!" Distraught, Elizabeth sobbed "Goodbye mother ..." was all she could manage. Elizabeth all but dropped the phone onto its base. Her chest was heaving now, as she sobbed. So much bad news all in one short phone call! She went to stand at the window, looking out towards Nicholas' flat, left with a thousand thoughts spinning through her head, each of them more disturbing and upsetting than the last. At least now she wouldn't have to worry about catching up with her studies, but she'd also be separated from Nicholas again, not able to see him every day like they'd grown accustomed to. Just the thought of it made her want to cry even more! But what could she do? She was in Cape Town staying in residence, studying, at her parent's expense. If they withdrew support, she'd have nowhere to go but to their home, back to Wellington. That would mean she and Nicholas would see each other on weekends, maybe only one day, not every day. Elizabeth turned now lay on her bed, burying her face in her pillow. Everything felt so hopeless again. It seemed that every time she and Nicholas were happy, her mother suddenly appeared again, to ruin everything!

Chapter 25

The restaurant was loud and filled with a dizzying rush of appetizing smells and clanging music, mingled with dozens of conversations, everyone shouting to be heard above the band. Elizabeth took one step inside the restaurant and received an instant headache. She followed Nicholas, Denise, and her eldest sister, Sandra, through the milling crowds to a booth at the far end of the restaurant. The waiter took their orders for drinks and then disappeared.

"So, Elizabeth!" Denise exclaimed. "You've decided to marry my best friend. Congratulations! Now maybe we can be friends, too? I'd like to get to know you better."

Elizabeth smiled politely. "Of course."

"I hope you know you can count on me for anything." Denise reached for her hand across the table and squeezed it gently. "And if you need any help planning the wedding . . ." Denise's grin and sparkling green eyes finished her sentence for her.

Sandra laughed loudly. "I'll second that. I love weddings!"

Nicholas grinned and bumped shoulders with Elizabeth. He turned his head and spoke into Elizabeth's ear, but loud enough for everyone to hear: "It sounds like we have some willing slaves. We should take full advantage of them."

"Yes, please do!" Denise said.

Elizabeth laughed, nodding absently. "I'll see what I can do."

"Good! Fantastic!" Denise said. "So, when is the wedding?"

Elizabeth's gaze drifted elsewhere. She was looking around her. Abruptly she realized someone had asked her a question. "I'm sorry," she said. "I need to go to the *loo*. I'll be right back."

Denise smiled and nodded. "See you soon."

Elizabeth left the table in a hurry. Once inside the bathroom, she went up to the sink and leaned heavily on it. She stared deeply into the mirror and frowned at her reflection. She took a moment to critique her appearance, but then her eyes swam out of focus and she felt a crushing weight of fatigue descend on her. The drums from the band were thudding perceptibly through the walls and floor, and her head throbbed painfully with each beat.

She closed her eyes and began massaging her temples. She had a sudden, desperate need for air. The whole restaurant felt claustrophobic and uncomfortably hot. She longed to leave and just go lie down in a cool, dark room, to forget about her myriad troubles until morning. But she couldn't leave. She'd promised Nicholas an evening with his friends, so she had several hours more of this to endure . . . She sighed wearily and opened her eyes once more. She looked somehow twice her age when she stared at herself in the bad lighting and smudgy mirror of the restroom. She leaned forward and began obsessing over the lines on her forehead.

Suddenly she heard the door to the bathroom open, letting in an unwelcome burst of noise. A moment later she saw in the mirror that it was Denise who had come in.

"There you are!" Denise said, coming to stand beside her at the mirror. "I thought maybe you'd got lost." Elizabeth shot Denise a quick glance and shook her head. She winced with the movement. Denise didn't miss it. "Are you all right?" she asked. "You don't look too well."

"I'm fine. It's just the noise from the band. I have a headache."

"Oh, no, this was a bad idea, then! We should have picked a quieter place. . . ."

"No, don't worry, I'm sure it will pass in a minute. It's probably just stress."

Denise began nodding. "Well, how about we just finish our drinks and then go? We can go somewhere more relaxing, maybe go for a walk and get some fresh air."

Elizabeth's mood lifted at the suggestion. "You wouldn't mind?"

"Of course not! Come on, let's go. The band is horrible anyway." Denise took her by the arm and began leading her from the restroom. Elizabeth winced as they walked out into the chaos and noise of the restaurant once more, but it wasn't more than half an hour before they'd finished their drinks and paid the bill.

As they walked out of the restaurant, a fresh, salty breeze blew in off the ocean, and Elizabeth let out a sigh of relief. "Sorry to rain on everyone's parade," she said.

"Nonsense!" Denise said. "I wanted to leave, too. It's so much nicer out here. Why don't we go down to the marina and walk along the docks?"

"Sounds like a plan," Nicholas said, taking Elizabeth's hand in his and giving it a squeeze.

All the way to the docks Nicholas, Denise, and Sandra kept up a steady banter of conversation, but Elizabeth kept quiet. She retreated into her thoughts, worrying around in circles. She

couldn't move back to Wellington! And she didn't *want* to go to Canada. What was she going to do?

They walked out onto the docks, sitting down on the edge of an empty berth, their feet dangling above the dark water. The water was lapping gently against the wooden pillars. A string of lanterns hanging above their heads waved in the breeze, causing shadows to skitter back and forth across dock. The water glittered darkly in the lantern light. Elizabeth was aware of the conversations continuing all around her, but she couldn't focus on them, instead she watched the steady rise and fall of the black water and let her gaze disappear in the fathomless depths. She listened to the boats rocking in their berths, bobbing and knocking up against the docks, letting the sounds lull her into a dreamy daze.

Denise was the first to notice she wasn't contributing to the conversation. "You seem awfully distant, Elizabeth."

"Hmmm?" She looked up and suddenly noticed that everyone was staring at her. "Oh, I'm just distracted."

"About what?" Denise pressed.

Elizabeth bit her lip and hesitated. "Ah . . ."

"You don't have to share, but if you're worried about something, it might help to get a fresh perspective. Maybe some friendly advice. I'm good at listening and giving advice. Just ask Nicholas. I advised him to visit you in Wellington a few years ago, and just look how well that turned out!"

"Really?" Elizabeth shot Denise an appraising look, then her gaze settled on Nicholas, regarding him with eyebrows raised.

"It's true," he nodded. "She's given me good advice in the past."

"Hmmm. Well, I don't know . . . this is . . . complicated. And I should probably talk to you about it first, Nicholas. Alone."

"Oh?" Nicholas asked, his brow casting a shadow over his eyes.

"Ah," Denise interrupted, "well if it's something private, I don't want to pry."

"Actually, I'd rather know now," he said. "If it's not too private."

"Well . . ." Elizabeth hesitated, finding refuge once more in the depths of the harbor. "My parents are . . ."

"Your parents are?" Nicholas pressed.

Elizabeth swallowed her anxiety. "They're not going to pay for me to go to school any longer. They say they can't afford it and they need me to come home until we move to Canada."

Silence fell and hovered over the group like a kettle of vultures. Elizabeth looked up to check for Nicholas's reaction. He was gaping at her in horror. "When did they decide this?"

"Today. My mom called just before we went out with the news."

Nicholas shook his head, dumbstruck, unable to form a reply.

Denise wasn't so incapacitated. "Well Elizabeth? The real question is, what do *you* want to do?"

"I want to keep studying!" Elizabeth blurted. "Well—maybe not physiotherapy, but something! I don't want to go home, and I definitely don't want to move to Canada!"

"So, why don't you just stay, then?" Denise pressed.

"I meant to, but now . . ." Elizabeth shook her head. "If my parents won't pay for my tuition, my books, my residence . . . what am I supposed to do? Where do I live if not with them?"

"Well, you could get a job, move in to an apartment somewhere. Save up to finish studying yourself. You don't need their help. It would be nice, but you're a grown, capable woman and you can do it on your own if you have to."

"I . . . I hadn't thought of that."

"With your parents moving and you staying, it was bound to happen sooner or later - that you'd have to become independent."

Sandra was nodding solemnly. "I work and study at the same time. It is possible."

"So do I," Denise put in.

"I guess I could . . ." Elizabeth said.

"Is that what you want?" Nicholas asked, his eyes searching hers carefully – hopefully. "Are you sure you don't want to move to Canada to be close to your parents?"

"I . . . well, we're engaged, Nicholas! I'm not leaving you."

He smiled wanly. "Yes, we're engaged, and I didn't mean alone, I meant I could move too. Just not right away. You'd have to stay until I'm finished with my degree, then we'd apply to go to Canada as a couple. Your mother is right about one thing—South Africa's future is looking grim. When apartheid falls . . ."

No one needed him to finish that thought. They all knew what would happen if apartheid fell. And lately it didn't seem like a matter of *if* but *when*. Every day there was a new story in the news about mounting international pressure for South Africa to abandon their racist policy of segregation—not to mention the internal pressure caused by ever-increasing violence from militant anti-apartheid groups inside the country.

"You'd do that for me?" Elizabeth asked. "Leave your family—" She sent a quick glance to Denise and Sandra, "— and all of your friends behind?"

Nicholas grinned. "I'd follow you to the ends of the earth, Elizabeth." He leaned in and dropped a kiss on her forehead, but before he could pull away, she pulled his lips down to hers and kissed him properly. For a moment the world around them ceased to exist, and all their problems seemed to melt away.

After some time, they heard Denise clear her throat. "It's a lovely evening, isn't it, Sandy?"

Elizabeth laughed. "Sorry," she said, letting Nicholas go.

"What for?" Denise asked brightly, "He earned that kiss."

Nicholas laughed then, too. "I guess we got a bit distracted."

"Yes, something like that," Denise replied, her gaze flicking between them as her grin became broader and her eyes began to sparkle with mischief. "If that's your story ..."

"It is," Nicholas said.

"And we're sticking to it," Elizabeth put in.

Denise and Sandra laughed. Once the mood had sobered, Denise thought to ask what no one yet had, "So, when are you supposed to move back in with your parents?"

Elizabeth frowned. "This weekend."

"So soon?" Nicholas asked, shocked.

"Yes."

"I guess you'd better start looking for a job soon, then," Denise replied. "Else it's going to be a lot tougher doing so from there."

"Yeah . . ." Elizabeth sighed. "And find an apartment . . ."

"Hey!" Sandra started, as a brilliant idea just occurred to her.

"What is it?" Nicholas asked.

"Why doesn't she move into our building? The rent is cheap, and I happen to know someone who is just moving out of a small bachelor suite, leaving his bed and furniture behind."

"Really?" Elizabeth asked.

"I could get the details for you if you'd like."

"That would be great! Thank you."

"Not at all."

Elizabeth smiled. Maybe this recent bit of bad news wasn't so bad at all. Like Denise said, she would have had to become independent from her parents sooner or later anyway, and now was as good a time as any, so it wasn't the end of the world. She could take a break from her studies long enough to figure out what she really wanted to do. She'd gone into medicine at her mother's insistence, not because she was truly passionate about it. Then she'd chosen physiotherapy because it seemed the most to her liking of all the possible professions in medicine. Even so, she hated it. It was definitely not her type of job. But what was? She really didn't know – yet. Maybe she'd find something she liked better by working at it for a while. But whatever job she decided to get, she'd have to find it sooner rather than later. It was already Tuesday! Tomorrow was Wednesday, and her father would be there on Friday to bring her home. Maybe she could delay him? She'd have to tell her parents what she was planning

and get some cooperation from them. Elizabeth winced at the thought of that conversation.

Nicholas noticed her expression and asked, "What is it?"

"I was just thinking about what my mother's going to say when I tell her that I'm going to get a job and start renting an apartment here in Cape Town – and in your building."

"Yeah . . . I guess she won't be too pleased about that. Maybe if I talked to her?"

Elizabeth shot him a strange look. "How would that help? You and she aren't exactly good friends."

"Well, I know she doesn't like me much, but maybe if I told her that we'll follow them to Canada after I finish my studies?"

"Are you sure, Nicholas?"

He shrugged. "Why not? I've always wanted to live in the U.S. and Canada is pretty close to the same thing - I think?"

"What about your family?"

"I've always lived apart from them. I'm used to it. Boarding school, remember? My friends are closer than my family, and . . ." He cast a glance to Denise and Sandra. "Well, I *will* miss you guys, but I have to follow my heart and help Lizzie."

Denise smiled wanly. "Likewise, but don't let us hold you back. We'll come and visit you there, it would be a lot of fun!"

Elizabeth shook her head in awe. "Thank you, Nicholas . . . but you won't need to do that. My dad won't move. He hasn't said so yet, but he's not going to leave. I can see it on his face every time the discussion is raised. It won't come to that. And I don't want to give my mother our support to leave. That might just tip the balance in her favor. So let's wait. But I really do appreciate it." She gave him a sudden hug, squeezing him until he laughed.

"Hey don't break anything! I like my ribs the way they are."

Denise smiled watching them wistfully. "So what are you going to tell your mother?"

Elizabeth shrugged. "I'll tell her what I'm planning now."

"And about Canada?"

"The same thing I've already told her. My life's here. My future is here. My future husband—" She interrupted herself to look at Nicholas. "—is here. I'm not going, and she can't make me!"

Denise nodded and placed an arm around Elizabeth's shoulder, giving her a hug. "A woman after my own heart! That's the spirit. I think with such strong reasons to stay your mother will have no choice but to change her plans. She can't force both you and your father to leave, if you don't want to."

Elizabeth nodded. "Exactly! Though she will keep trying."

Chapter 26

Elizabeth watched her mother's cheeks puff out and her face contort, bracing herself in anticipation.

"You stupid little girl! Can't you see that you don't have any choice in these matters? This isn't up for debate. You're coming home now and your coming to Canada with us. That's that!"

Elizabeth shook her head slowly, hoping her pounding heart and shaking legs didn't show. Somehow arguing with her mother always felt like a life-threatening battle. "I'm not coming home and I'm not going with, and you can't make me."

"Well, you're not twenty-one yet, so you don't have a choice!" With that, Constance stood from the armchair where she'd been sitting, spun on her heels, and walked away. Elizabeth sat on the couch staring blankly after her mother disappearing down the hallway. Edwin was also staring after her, frowning heavily. When Constance reached the door to the master bedroom, she opened it and promptly slammed it behind her.

Edwin turned to his daughter with a shaky smile. "Don't worry, she'll get over it. I think it's just a shock to her that you're finally all grown up and can make your own decisions."

"Is it true dad?" Elizabeth asked, ignoring his reassurance.

Edwin cocked his head. "Is what true?"

"That I'm still a minor until I'm twenty-one?"

Edwin hesitated. "I don't know. . . ." His brow furrowed in thought. "It could be? She seems to be convinced it is."

"If it's true, then I really don't have any choice." Suddenly Elizabeth was on her feet and pacing.

"She'll come around," Edwin soothed.

"No, she won't, Dad. You know it. She'll do everything she can to make me conform, and if she can, she'll force me to go."

"Well . . ." Edwin grew silent. Elizabeth waited for him to continue, to say something, to put his foot down, even if only in private with her. She wanted him to admit that he wasn't going to leave South Africa either, but he didn't say anything. When the silence grew interminably long, at last he whispered something: "I don't know, but I suspect we're right to worry."

Elizabeth barely heard him over her screaming thoughts. She stopped pacing to regard her father. "Would you please take me back to Cape Town Dad? I can't stay here now."

"Of course," he said, rising. "Remember, though your mother may not have mentioned this, you still have a few weeks left in residence, that I've already paid for. I'll give you some money to last a month or so. I'm sure you'll find a job before then."

"Thanks, Dad. It's nice to know someone is on my side."

"Your mother is on your side, too, Elizabeth."

"Well, she sure has a funny way of showing it, dad."

"Everyone sees the world in their own way. We can't all always see eye to eye. If we did, we'd all be the same, and wouldn't that be boring!" He fixed her with an infectious grin, which somehow managed to defuse Elizabeth's worry for a moment.

A smile flickered to her lips and she sighed. "I guess."

"She'll come around," Edwin said again. "Meanwhile let's get you back and give her a chance to cool off."

Elizabeth followed her father to the front door. Along the way she was worrying her lip, and then she was chewing her nails. At last she asked, "Are you really going to move, Dad?"

He turned to her as he opened the front door. Sunlight spilled in, silhouetting him in a white-gold glow. He grinned and his eyes sparkled reassuringly. "Don't worry so much about the future, Lizzie. I'm sure by the time we get there, we'll have it figured it out, and all will end well."

Elizabeth frowned. "That wasn't an answer."

He shrugged. "Your mother might be right. The South Africa we love is changing so fast that soon all we'll be holding on to are our memories of what it used to be like, or maybe worse?"

Elizabeth shook her head as she pulled on her high-heels and walked out the door. "I find that hard to believe. It won't change overnight and they'll work it out too – they have to."

"But it is changing."

"Then you agree with her. You think it's time to leave."

"It's a . . . hard decision. I don't *want* to leave."

"I knew it," Elizabeth said, sending him a conspiratorial smile. "I told Mom you wouldn't go."

Edwin's brow furrowed and he seemed to disappear abruptly into his thoughts. After a few meaningful seconds of silence, he asked, "When exactly did you say that to her?"

Elizabeth shrugged as she walked around the side of the car and opened the passenger's side door. "A few weeks ago, when Nicholas came to ask for your permission to marry me."

"Oh," Edwin said, climbing in on the driver's side. "I see." His

frown didn't lift as he started the engine and pulled the Mercedes out of the driveway, it intensified.

Elizabeth watched him carefully, noting his troubled expression. "What is it dad?" she asked.

He shook his head, giving her a forced smile. "What is what?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "Never mind." Her gaze disappeared out the window and she drifted off, deep in thought. What if her mother was right? What if she didn't have a choice but to move with her family to Canada? She had to find out as soon as possible, even before she started looking for a job. Otherwise, what would be the point?

Edwin drove her back to Cape Town with a heavy heart. Elizabeth was far away, off in space somewhere—daydreaming, her mind swirling with worries, no doubt. Her distracted silence suited him just fine, since it gave him some time alone with his own thoughts, which he now needed, thanks in part to her.

All his married life he'd taken the path of least resistance. He'd found ways to work around his wife and circumvent her without turning every discussion into a mortal argument. She was a strong woman. He'd always known that. It was a big part of what had attracted him to her. She was so assertive, so independent, so confident, so commanding—he wasn't sure what it was about him that she found that attractive, but he had also learned early on in their relationship that she would be a difficult woman to live with because of the very qualities that had attracted him to her. It was an unfortunate irony.

He'd always thought he'd just have to put up with it, to find a way to endure Constance's barbs and domineering ways. He'd had to satisfy himself with the knowledge that he'd never really see a softer side of his wife. But then, as Elizabeth had grown older, she'd come to embody every quality Constance lacked. Elizabeth was the complete opposite of her mother, and between the two of them, he now had the best of both his strong, relentless wife and his milder, more compassionate daughter. When his wife was being unreasonable, he could take refuge in his daughter's company. They shared a special kind of conspiratorial bond which had only grown stronger in recent years. When Constance drove one or both of them mad, they knew they could find support and sympathy with one another. When Edwin thought about it, that was a big part of the reason he didn't want to leave South Africa: because Elizabeth was going to stay. But now, something she'd said to him just a few minutes ago had twisted like a knife in his ribs. Had he seen another side of Elizabeth, a crueler side which she may have learned from her

mother? It was bound to happen.

Only days ago, when he'd been talking with his wife, about their immigration proceedings that were going smoothly at the Canadian embassy, his wife had practically danced around the room with glee. Then he'd said something to bring her off of her high and she'd quickly rounded on him with an acid rebuke.

"Are you still waffling?" He'd denied it, but then what she'd said next had shocked him to the core. *"Elizabeth was right!"*

"What do you mean?" he'd asked. *"Right about what?"*

Twisting Elizabeth's words purposely, Constance had replied, *"She said you don't have the guts to move!"* With that, his wife had stormed out of the room, leaving him to wallow in his shock. He'd told himself a dozen times since then that his wife was lying. Elizabeth couldn't have said that! She couldn't have turned on him and broken their bond of mutual confidence, of trust and support by disrespecting him so wantonly, and worse, by disrespecting him to their mutual adversary.

But then, just now, as innocently as if there'd been nothing wrong with such an act of betrayal and disrespect, Elizabeth had confirmed it to him as they'd walked out to the car.

"I knew it," she'd said. *"I told mom you wouldn't go!"*

It was almost more than he could take. He'd known for some time that his wife had lost her respect for him. He wasn't quite sure how to get it back, but he'd found comfort in Elizabeth's admiration and respect. Somehow it was easier to command respect from his daughter than from his wife. He told himself that it wasn't because he wasn't worthy of respect, it was because his wife was difficult and hard to please. The fact that he still had Elizabeth's respect was proof. But now, there were some worrying signs showing. Signs that maybe he was losing his daughter's respect, too. He couldn't bear the thought of it.

You don't think I have the guts to leave? I was on your side, Lizzie, right up until now. Now we're moving and that's that! You'll just have to come along or be left behind. Edwin's lips drew into a thin, hard line, and his eyes were narrowed to slits.

"Dad, is something bothering you?" Elizabeth asked from beside him for the second time since they'd left Wellington.

He took a while to reply. "Just thinking dear, just thinking."

"About?"

"Things that must be done now." He left it there and he felt Elizabeth's gaze lingering on him as she waited for him to elaborate, but he had no intention of giving her further clues to his thoughts. It was time to show her and his wife both just how decisive he could be. It would be a shame if that meant leaving

his daughter and future son-in-law behind, but maybe his wife was right. Maybe Elizabeth couldn't legally stay behind until she turned 21. And if not, well, Constance would still somehow get her way. He knew first hand just how *persuasive* his wife could be. Somehow, sooner or later, she always got what she wanted, as though she were in league with Fate itself.

As Edwin pulled up to the curb, he remembered. Reaching into his blazer's pocket, he pulled out a small, old, silver ring, then turning to Elizabeth, said "Lizzie, I know you loved your granny very much! I know she loved you just as much. I was very close to my mom too. Neither of us even got to say goodbye to her. However, this arrived for you from Port Elizabeth, from Granny. You're her eldest grand daughter, and she was very specific in her will, that nobody should get this ring, other than you!" he said, handing it to her. "I know she was very attached to this ring."

Elizabeth remembered the ring, very well. Tears welled up in her eyes as she reached out to take the antique silver amethyst ring from her dad, looked at it through her tears, then slipped it onto her ring finger. It fit perfectly – but she already knew that much, as her granny had her try it on the last time she went to visit her. Replying, as best she could with her throat closing up she said "Thanks dad". Sensing the awkwardness of the moment, they quickly said goodbye. Lizzie got out of the car, closed the door, and watched Edwin drive off, leaving her standing there.

* * *

"No, I don't buy it, Lizzie. That's ridiculous." He began shaking his head. "It can't be."

"How do you know?"

They were sitting in the park, enjoying a mid-afternoon picnic. It was Sunday and neither one of them had any plans for the day except that they would spend it together. The sun was glinting gold through the canopy of leaves overhead. The branches were creaking in the wind and the leaves clapping together in a gentle rustle of applause.

"I just do. It's not possible that you have to be twenty-one before you can make your own decisions. Heck, I was 18 and the government had me sign the papers submitting my life to them in the military for almost two years, without my parent's permission. They only required that for fighter-pilot training."

"Well, how do we find out?"

Nicholas frowned out at the sparkling blue water of the city reservoir. "I'll look into it tomorrow. I have a friend who is a magistrate's son. I'm sure he can get us an audience with his father. He'll be able to tell us what the law says about it."

“Okay” Elizabeth said, sounding hopeful.

“Until then, don't worry. I know plenty of guys and girls who left home at eighteen, myself included.”

“Leaving home is one thing,” Elizabeth said. “I'm not living at home anymore, either, but that doesn't necessarily mean that my parents can't still make decisions for me. Remember, when you wanted to become a fighter pilot, you needed permission.”

“Well . . .” He hesitated at the reminder, realizing that she had a point. He'd been over 18, but he'd still somehow required his parents' permission for that. “Tomorrow we'll find out for sure.”

Elizabeth sighed. “I wish I knew now – I'm really nervous.”

Nicholas reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze, his eyes seeking hers. When their gazes met, he said, “You worry too much, Lizzie. Has anyone ever told you that?”

She smiled ruefully. “All the time, but then again, I've had to.”

He reached up with his other hand to stroke her cheek. “No more worrying for today, ok, let's just enjoy this time together.”

With that, Elizabeth let out a deep sigh and slumped her shoulders. “Okay.” She began absently picking at the grass around their picnic blanket. A cloud passed in front of the sun, and Nicholas watched as the life and light seemed to fade from her eyes. Seeing how weary and lonely she looked, he reached out, enfolding her in a warm hug. She abandoned her efforts to pull up the grass and fell against him gratefully. “Why is she so determined to make my life difficult Nicholas? She always has.”

Nicholas didn't have to ask who she meant. He shook his head. “Maybe because what's difficult for you is easier for her. I don't know. Why do parents ever interfere? Sometimes they probably think they're acting in our best interests.”

“And when they're obviously not?”

He hesitated. “She'll come around.”

“That's what my dad says.”

“Well, maybe he's right.”

“I hope so.”

“I bet in her way she's already feeling sorry.”

Elizabeth pulled slowly out of his arms and smiled up at him. “Always the optimist – that's one thing I love about you!”

* * *

Constance put the finishing touches on her letter and sealed the envelope. She made sure to stick enough postage on it to get it to Charles in England. It might have been strange that she still kept in touch with Charles, but for the relationship that they'd developed while he'd been dating and later engaged to her daughter. That relationship was now coming in handy. She subtly

kept Charles abreast of Elizabeth's life, making sure he didn't forget her. She knew that in such matters the best way to get over someone was to never see or hear from them again, and Constance was determined to make sure Charles didn't have that luxury. It seemed he had not yet found the woman to replace Elizabeth, and reading between the lines, Constance could tell he was still very much hung up on her.

This was all very encouraging to Constance, and it would serve her plans well. Charles had already proven he was a restless soul, living first in England, then South Africa, then England again. All he lacked to tie him down in one place was the right woman. Constance intended to provide him that—in Canada. Once Elizabeth came with them to Canada, her engagement to Nicholas would be ruined. She'd slowly forget about him. Then all it would take would be for Charles to reappear as a shoulder for her to cry on—an old friend. From there he could easily ingratiate himself once more. Constance knew her daughter. She knew Elizabeth didn't hold grudges; she quickly forgot offences. *Foolish girl*. Constance shook her head and smiled as she held the envelope. Her daughter's foolishness was about to work in her favor!

* * *

Nicholas watched as the magistrate took his seat behind a large, wooden desk in a room where the walls were covered with books. The magistrate was actually *Judge* Johannes Smit, but he insisted they call him *Oom* (Uncle) Smit. Nicholas and Elizabeth took their seats in front of his desk, and then *Oom* Smit asked them, "Well, what is it you'd like to know?" He was on his lunch break, and before Nicholas or Elizabeth could even open their mouths to speak, there came a knock at the door, and the judge called out, "Come in!"

Nicholas turned to see his secretary come striding in with a tray of food and a can of coke with condensation already beading on it. The secretary set the tray in front of her boss, and he thanked her. As she was about to leave, the judge stopped her with a hand on her arm and asked Nicholas and Elizabeth, "Would either of you like anything?"

Nicholas hesitated, deferring to Lizzie. She shook her head. "We don't want to take any more of your time than we need to."

The judge nodded to his secretary and let her go. Once the door was shut behind her, he glanced up from spreading a napkin across his lap. "Go on, then."

"Well, we're planning to get married," Nicholas said. The judge was in mid-bite of his sandwich, so he merely nodded. Nicholas went on, "The problem is my fiancée's family is planning to leave

the country, and they're insisting she go, too."

"That's a problem," the judge said taking a bite of a sandwich.

"Yes," Nicholas replied, "It sure has been, and we need help."

Elizabeth carried on where he'd left off. "My mother is trying to force me to go with them. Her latest trick was to tell me I don't have a choice, because I'm not 21 yet. We wanted to know if that's true, or if I really am still a minor until I'm twenty-one."

The judge gave a short snort of laughter. He shook his head, smiling at them, his eyes shining with warmth and sympathy. "Well, your mother really is grasping at straws, my dear. You'd have to go a very long way indeed to find a country where the law states that you need to be twenty-one before you can assert your independence from parents. No, you don't have to tow their line anymore. You're free to do as you please! And judging from what you've told me, I strongly suggest you do!"

Nicholas smiled. "Thank you, Oom Smit, for your time." He sent Elizabeth a triumphant look as they rose from their seats.

The judge waved his hand. "Before you go, a word of advice—" He waited for their attention, finishing a bite of his sandwich. The judge swallowed and then continued, "Don't put too much pressure on yourselves now. Getting married is a big enough decision all by itself. If you add to that whether or not to move from one country to another, you'll just confuse the issue."

"Thank you," Nicholas said. "That's good advice."

Once they were outside the courthouse, walking to Nicholas's car, Elizabeth gave him a dry look. "You're awfully smug."

"Why shouldn't I be?" He said through a grin. "I was right."

Elizabeth smirked. "Well, it is good news. I guess now I'd better start looking for a job, hey?" Lizzie was smiling, happy!

They reached Nicholas's car, where it was parked on the curb around the side of the building. His car was shining a glossy dusk blue in the shadows cast by the row of trees on the sidewalk. Nicholas walked around the passenger's side and opened the door for Elizabeth. "What job are you thinking of?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. What can I get without a degree? I was thinking of maybe becoming a secretary." She smiled up at him. "Humble beginnings, but I have no choice."

He returned her smile and then shut the door behind her, considering her words as he rounded the car. *Humble beginnings . . . better than no beginnings at all*, he thought as he climbed in on the driver's side. He turned the key in the ignition and pulled out into the street, thinking ...

Whatever came their way, they'd be facing it together – yet again. They were together now, and that's all that mattered!

Chapter 27

Life was becoming the very worst kind of routine—a mix of stress, work, and more stress, with increasingly sleepless nights. The only time Elizabeth was able to forget about all of her mounting worries was when she was with Nicholas. They spent a lot more time together now that they were both living in Liesbeeck Gardens, and now that she no longer had a curfew, like at residence. If they both opened their curtains, they could wave to one another across the courtyard which lay in the center of the box-shaped apartment building. It was just a short walk down the hall, around the corner, and up a flight of stairs from her apartment to his. Almost equally close, was Denise and Sandra's apartment. Elizabeth found she was beginning to warm up to Denise. She wasn't the vulture in the eyrie that Elizabeth had pictured, rather she was a well-meaning friend, with a slight but discernible crush on Nicholas. But Denise's crush was tempered by her good nature and genuine concern for her childhood friend. So Elizabeth felt no reason to fear that she would try to steal Nicholas away.

Every night Elizabeth ate dinner with him, either in his apartment, or hers, or they'd go out somewhere—usually the Spur, because it was all they could afford on a regular basis. During the day he studied at UCT while she studied at secretarial college in Sea Point.

It wasn't exactly what she'd always dreamed of doing. In fact, she wasn't sure what she'd always dreamed of doing, but she was quite certain now that it wasn't either physiotherapy or being a secretary. The trouble was, she needed something to pay the bills and stay close to Nicholas, and rather than accept a job with minimum wage, she had convinced her father to put her through secretarial college. Elizabeth knew if her mother had her way, she would be back at home right now, waiting to move with them to Canada, but her father was considerably more supportive. At first, Elizabeth had suspected that it was because he didn't want to move either, but just a few weeks ago, when she'd gone to lunch with her father and all but begged him to pay her expenses

until she finished secretarial college, he'd revealed the shocking news that he'd made up his mind: they would be in Canada before Christmas. There were several likely buyers for their home; they'd already sold her mother's convertible, their caravan, his BMW motorbike etc.

Elizabeth had been shocked by his seemingly sudden decision. *"What made up your mind?"* she'd asked.

He'd just shaken his head and avoided her gaze. *"That's not important now. But what is important is what you're going to do about it."* He'd looked at her then, his eyes searching hers. Elizabeth had felt in that moment like her world was crumbling and spinning away from her one little piece at a time. She'd been unable to find her voice, let alone what she wanted to say. *"Give it some thought, Lizzie. You're not married yet."*

He'd emphasized that word carefully, as though maybe she should be reconsidering her engagement. Elizabeth had come away from that lunch even more depressed and uncertain about her future than before, even though her father had agreed to give her his support while she trained to become a secretary. It seemed now that far greater problems were looming on the horizon. She couldn't imagine living so far from her family. Not only would they be in another country, but in another continent and another hemisphere. The distance between them would be too great to travel on a regular basis.

Those worries had beaten her down in recent weeks. She spent as much of the day sleeping as she could, but then her nights were restless and full of nightmares. She tried to focus on her secretarial training and on Nicholas, and in taking joy in life's simple pleasures: watching the sun set over the ocean, walking along the beach with Nicholas after dark, finding a secluded spot to lie down and look up at the stars while the waves boomed and swished in the background . . . and when all else failed, there was always candy. Somehow a handful of Jelly Tots always made her feel better, even if only for a moment. Nicholas knew she had a sweet tooth, so he kept her well-stocked with all her favorite candies.

Unfortunately, all that had caught up to her just a week ago when she'd found she couldn't even eat those candies anymore because her teeth were hurting. She'd known that was a bad sign and had immediately stopped indulging her bad habit. When she'd gone to see the dentist, he'd informed her that she had several cavities in her back teeth and they needed to be filled before they got any worse. When she'd called to ask her parents for the money for the dental work, her mother had become

incredulous: "You want us to pay for your dental bills as well as everything else? Elizabeth, you're living on your own now, with all of the independence and responsibility that implies. You can't have the one without the other. Besides, we're already paying for your secretarial training, and for your apartment, and food, and goodness knows what else! Do we seem like millionaires to you? Figure it out for yourself."

"But I don't have a job yet! How am I supposed to pay?"

Her mother had huffed loudly on the other end of the line. "That's not our problem! Let Nicholas pay for it. After all, he bought the candies for you that rotted your teeth, and he's your fiancé now—shouldn't he be looking after you? Or is it that he's not quite up to the task? If so, perhaps, you'd better think twice about your upcoming nuptials—just a word of advice, my girl!"

Elizabeth had been caught speechless for a moment. Up until then she'd been wincing with pain from her rotten teeth, but at her mother's words, she'd begun wincing from a different sort of pain. "*Well, thanks for nothing, Mother,*" she replied, disappointed.

"Don't get sarcastic with me my girl! Be grateful for what we do pay for. We can't pay for everything. Next minute you'll be asking us for a car! Really! Sometimes your ingratitude knows no bounds, Elizabeth. You really are a selfish girl, you know that?"

"I *am* grateful," she sighed, trying to slough off her mother's attacks on her character. "Anyway, I'll talk to Nicholas. Maybe between the two of us we can figure something out. I'd better go now. I need to get back to my studies."

"Goodbye." And with that, her mother had hung up.

Nicholas had winced, but agreed to pay her dental bills. They'd settled on going out to eat less often and doing less expensive things for dates in order to come up with the money. Meanwhile, Nicholas would draw down his meager savings to pay for it. She was certainly grateful to him. He didn't have a job either.

Now it was the beginning of spring, only a couple of horrible months away from the end of the year and her family's move. The house was sold and Edwin was making final arrangements at work before resigning. It was all becoming real. Too real!

And amidst it all, there was a wedding to plan. She'd tried to raise the issue with her parents, but she'd received all the by-now familiar excuses: "*We're strapped for money at the moment, Elizabeth. Just wait until the move is through, and we'll give you a big white wedding one day—in Canada, you'll see.*" So Elizabeth had settled in to wait. She comforted herself with the knowledge that neither she nor Nicholas could really afford to be married yet anyway. Maybe it would be easier to think about when at least

she was working and he was a little closer to finishing his studies. . . .

* * *

Nicholas sighed, bringing Elizabeth out of her thoughts and back to the present. They were lying together on a blanket on Long Beach, a pristine, remote Atlantic beach at the end of Chapman's peak drive, not far away from where he had proposed to Lizzie. For them it was kind of like their waterfall and pool, only here there were mountains, big rocks, a mile-long sandy beach, sand dunes and waves—lots of waves! It was so far from Cape Town, that at night it was deserted, and thus a nice place to be alone in nature. They were trying to put all the recent complications behind them, and live in the moment, if only *just* for a while. He was gazing up at the stars while she was listening with one ear to the sound of the surf crashing in the background, and with her other to the steady rhythm of Nicholas's heartbeat. This was one of their less expensive dates ever. Since they'd been forced, by her dental expenses, to save money, they'd actually discovered meaningful things to do that didn't require them to spend much. It was true what they said, Elizabeth thought: *The best things in life really are free.*

"Life can be good sometimes," Nicholas said.

"We must be reading each other's minds," she replied with a wan smile.

"Oh? Feeling less stressed tonight?"

"A little," she said quietly.

Now it was his turn to sigh. "I'm surprised that your father is really going."

"So am I."

"Still no clue what changed his mind?"

"None."

"Well . . ." Nicholas trailed off uncertainly. A frown creased his brow and his gaze wandered absently between the stars as he considered what he was about to say. "You know," he said, looking at her now. "My offer is still open. I'll go with you and your family to Canada. All I ask is that we stay until I finish my degree here. I cannot afford to start over now."

Elizabeth sat up so that she could look him in the eyes. "Are you sure you'd give it all up for me? Really?"

He sat up too, taking both of her hands in his. "Why not? Elizabeth, you are much closer to your family than I am to mine. It would be terribly selfish of me to ask you to live apart from them when I could more easily do the same."

Elizabeth shook her head, giving him a look that was both

awed and adoring. "I love you so much, Nicholas Strauss!"

He smiled then and kissed her on the lips. They lingered in each other's arms for what seemed like forever, and somehow even that wasn't long enough. Alone on that moonlit beach, with the waves thundering towards the shore mere yards away from where they lay, their hands now began to form fists in each other's hair, and their lips sought one another's in an eager rush. Before they knew it their hands were straying lower and their kisses were growing more and more urgent. Feeling his hands now down around her waist and realizing that she'd unbuttoned his shirt—that her hands were now moving under his shirt, over his bare back—Elizabeth pulled away abruptly and put a hand on Nicholas's bare chest to push him back. She let out a long breath, calming herself. When she looked up, he transfixed her with his passionate gaze, and a faint smile was threatening at the corners of his mouth. With a wink, he softly replied, "Waterfall? There, I said it first!"

She laughed, further defusing the tension.

"It's not a competition, Nicholas!"

"No—" He smiled. "—but I win anyway."

She laughed again, this time playfully, giving him a shove. He fell onto his back and pulled her down on top of him. For a moment she was worried they were about to fall into the same trap again and that this time they wouldn't stop, but he circumvented that by wrapping his arms around her in a firm bear-hug, pinning her in place, and giving both of them time to cool off. To her surprise, she realized that she was at least half of the problem; it wasn't just him. If they hadn't made that pact years ago in the wilderness, there'd be nothing to break the passionate spell that they both were very vulnerable to, and then maybe they wouldn't have been able to stop?

But now the moment had passed, and while it wasn't easy to resist their intense mutual attraction, at least for the moment Elizabeth felt more in control of herself again. They lay there on the beach together, Nicholas staring up at the sky, Elizabeth cuddling up against him, sharing their bodily warmth against the growing cold. The night had only just fallen, but it was already sucking the heat from the air, and the chill was beginning to cut through their clothes. They held one another's hands as they cuddled there, her head on his shoulder, her long hair cascading over her shoulder to the still-warm sand. The moon made its appearance on the horizon, its shimmering silver beams rhythmically broken as each swell crested and then broke in a thunderous roar.

"Oh my, that was close—what were we thinking?" Lizzie said with a sigh of relief, squeezing Nicholas's hand.

Nicholas sighed, too. "The usual, you know, what my grandpa always warned us boys about - never to lie down with a girl."

Elizabeth laughed nervously.

"Well, we are getting married, but an unplanned pregnancy could still really complicate our lives right now." He said.

"You don't know the half of it, Nicholas. My mother made it very clear to both my sister and me that if we ever fell pregnant outside of marriage, we shouldn't even bother to come home."

"But surely she can't mean that, Lizzie?" Nicholas said, turning towards her, his eyebrows raised in question.

"Oh, yes she does. I have no doubts about that!"

Nicholas just shook his head in disbelief.

"Thank you, Nicholas," she said, giving him a hug.

"For what?" he regarded her curiously.

"I've had boyfriends that would have taken advantage of a situation like this and others we've been in." He was about to reply, but Elizabeth continued, "I can still hear my mother ranting angrily, warning Hattie and me that she'll have no illegitimate children in her family—that no daughter of hers will ever be allowed to bring that kind of shame and humiliation upon her!"

Now it was Nicholas's turn to give her hand a squeeze. All he could think to say was, "Wow, that's harsh!"

"It is."

They fell silent again as they lay contemplating the beauty of the night sky. After a while they turned from their stargazing toward one another. Elizabeth felt his breath on her face as a warm, comforting caress. Their foreheads touched and soon Elizabeth found her eyes drifting shut. All the worry and stress seemed so far away, everything somehow narrowed down to the moment. She wished they could live in that moment forever.

* * *

Nicholas watched as Elizabeth's eyes closed and her expression relaxed, and he listened as her breathing quieted and steadied. He smiled, realizing that she'd just fallen asleep.

He watched her sleep for a while, marveling at how beautiful she was. He'd meant what he said and he was about to prove it. *Sometimes love is sacrifice*, he thought. Now his thoughts turned to his friends, family and country—everything he would ultimately end up leaving behind for her. It was everything he knew, but he'd gladly give it all up for Elizabeth. She'd been willing to do the same for him, but he knew that for her it would

have been a much bigger sacrifice - so he had to do it.

With that in mind , he returned to star-gazing , being careful not to disturb her sleep. As his eyes skipped between the stars, those few bright enough to outshine the radiant glow of the city, he wondered how the same sky might look different from Canada . What awaited them there? Would their future together be bright and shining , all clear skies and sun , or would it be fraught with rain and clouds? It seemed like they'd overcome all the greatest obstacles now. What else could there be? Constance couldn't help but approve of him now that he was going to make sure he brought her daughter to Canada when he finished university. Nicholas smiled up at the full moon , thinking , *Yes, life is good*. And their future would be bright so long as they were together. He refused to believe otherwise.



Nicholas and Elizabeth (Cape Town, South Africa, 1977) newly engaged and still university students. Their wishes were coming true now, their dreams (like the stars) were bright and numerous ... but all the while Constance worked overtime to extinguish them.

Chapter 28

Constance sat at the dinner table in her home with her arms crossed and an implacable look on her face as Nicholas worked his way up to whatever big news he'd come to share. She eyed him carefully, waiting for him to burst into flames. *He's the Devil in the flesh*, she thought. *He's not going to take my daughter away from me! He's not going to win out over Charles! I'll see to that!*

As they passed around the mashed potatoes and casserole, Edwin spoke, "So, Nicholas, what did you want to tell us?"

"Well . . ." Nicholas began, while accepting the potatoes from Elizabeth and spooning out a few giant scoops onto his plate. "Now that everything is more certain, and you're definitely going to be moving to Canada, I've given it careful thought, and I've realized that I don't have to stay in South Africa, I can go too."

Constance began frowning. *What's he getting at?*

Nicholas shrugged and passed the potatoes on to Constance. She accepted them whilst peering suspiciously at him. Nicholas went on: "My family and friends are a reason to stay, of course, but I've never been as close to my family as Elizabeth is to all of you." He nodded to Edwin and allowed his gaze to stray briefly across the table to Hattie. Constance noted that he didn't bother to look at her. A hint of a smile flickered through her frown. *Afraid to look me in the eye, boy?* She was still trying to find the hidden trick, the lie in his words, but so far she couldn't detect anything but sincerity. Edwin was giving Nicholas his undivided attention, as if he'd bought every word. His brow was raised in surprise and there was a hopeful look on his face which had transformed his features boyishly.

"There's every likelihood that once I graduate I'll find a better job and a better future in Canada anyway, so with all of that in mind, I want you to know that Elizabeth and I have decided, that once I graduate, we'll follow you to Canada."

Edwin was grinning and he looked ready to celebrate. He was just raising his glass of wine for a toast when Constance stopped him. "Really, Nicholas? You expect us to believe all that?" Nicholas turned to her, confusion written all over his face, but

Constance wasn't buying any of it. "Perhaps you should have rehearsed your lines a little better, because none of them rang true to my ears. I wasn't born yesterday. You're hoping to settle the question of Elizabeth's moving with us by delaying the matter until it's safely out of everyone's minds—well it won't work. You'll not take my daughter from me. She *will* move with us, and you *will* let her! You have no choice in this matter ... and she has no choice in the matter either!"

Elizabeth cleared her throat to talk "That's where you're wrong mother . . ." she started to say when Constance interrupted.

"Shut up, Elizabeth, what do you know? You're just a silly little girl," she shouted angrily at her. But Lizzie stood her ground.

"Actually, we went to see a magistrate, and got his ruling on this matter." She paused to look at first Edwin, then at a shocked Constance. "And he assures us that I've been able to make my own decisions after I turned eighteen, and Mother, I will do that!"

An aching silence followed those pronouncements. Constance waited a moment for her words to sink in and then she rose from the table. When Edwin began rising to his feet with her, she held out her hand to stop him. "No, please, sit. Don't get up on my account. I've just lost my appetite, but that shouldn't stop all of you. I went to great trouble to cook that meal, and now you'd all better eat it. I'll be in the kitchen doing the dishes if anyone should need me."

Constance felt a roomful of eyes watching her leave, but she shrugged off their shock and accusation. She was nobody's fool. Nicholas was not about to win with a bluff and Lizzie . . . well, she'd pay for her impertinence! She'd pay a very steep price!"

* * *

Nicholas shook his head, incredulous. "She didn't believe me!"

Elizabeth placed a hand on his arm. "I'll talk to her. She's just not a very trusting person, so it might take some time to convince her that you're serious."

"What must I do, stand on my head?"

Edwin cleared his throat. "Are you really serious, Nicholas? You would move to Canada once you're finished your studies?"

He turned to Edwin, his green eyes wide, blinking as he tried to recover from his shock. Belatedly, he realized that Edwin had asked him a question, forcing himself back to the moment, and nodding slowly he said, "Yes, I am serious. I meant what I said."

Edwin smiled. "Then please ignore my wife. I'll speak to her. Now, all that's left is to celebrate the good news." Edwin raised his wine glass, nodding in their direction. "To Canada."

They nodded, raising their glasses. "To Canada," they echoed.

Constance heard Edwin's toast over the clatter of dirty dishes and she almost couldn't stop herself from rushing out into the dining room and slapping him. What was wrong with him? Did he live in a bubble? He was so naïve it was almost intolerable! Yes, *just try to convince me that Nicholas is sincere, but it won't work. I'm not that much of a fool. And besides, so what if he is sincere? Shall I wait three years for my daughter to come home when I could have her there now? Shall I accept a lesser man for her when there is a better man waiting to marry her? Shall I just roll over and play dead?* She gave a derisive snort as she washed another plate and set it on the dish rack to dry. *Never! Nicholas will not win!*

Later that night, after Nicholas and Elizabeth had left, Edwin came into their room and shut the door quietly behind himself. She saw him walk up behind her in the bathroom mirror as she was removing her makeup. He wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her shoulder. She wasn't in the mood.

"You know, Nicholas isn't lying."

She rounded on him, breaking free of his embrace. "And what makes you so sure about that? He's lied about everything else!"

Edwin frowned. "What else has he lied about?"

"His intentions with our daughter, for one thing!"

Edwin shook his head. "What do you mean? They're engaged to be married. I'd say his intentions are honorable."

"Edwin, please tell me you're not that naïve." She waited for him to get it, but he just stared blankly at her, so she rushed on, "They're living in the same apartment building, Edwin! They're just a short walk down the hall from one another. He has but to knock on her door, and one plus one equals two." She crossed her fingers to illustrate her point. "He's not as innocent as he'd like you to believe, and neither, I'm afraid, is your daughter! I'm sure she now has no virtue left to defend."

Edwin's face took on a motley shade of red and his gaze hardened to steel, "I hadn't thought of that possibility."

"No? Well, I'm not surprised. You never think, do you?"

"Well, we're going to find out if there's any truth to this!"

"Oh? And how's that? Are you going to ask them?"

"You bloody bet I will! I'll storm right in tomorrow morning, early, and catch them in the act, together in bed—if they are."

Constance smiled, certain at last that she had her husband on her side. "Well," she reached out and squeezed his arm reassuringly. "I'm sure we'll get to the bottom of it. I'll come with you." *Just in case Nicholas manages to pull the wool over his eyes.* She was sure of what they'd find, and she didn't want to miss

Edwin's reaction. At least now she'd have something to use against them if Edwin championed their cause. Nicholas would forever be discredited in Edwin's eyes. It was a perfect plan!

* * *

Nicholas was in his apartment, up early getting ready for class, fixing himself a snack from the refrigerator. He'd just finished spreading peanut butter on a slice of bread when there came a furious knocking at the door.

"Open up! We know she's in there!" The knocking went on.

Nicholas frowned and stopped to listen with a lump of grape jelly quivering on the end of his knife. For a moment he was caught trying to decide who was on the other side of the door and whether or not it would be a good idea to answer it. Based on the ferocity of the knocking, he thought it might be a mental patient, escaped and come to kill the first random person he'd found—but then Nicholas recognized the voice and his frown deepened. He set the knife down and started toward the door.

He opened it to find his prediction to be correct, but he was surprised to see Constance as well. "Good morning, Mr. and Mrs. Smythe. This is an unexpected surprise to see you here. . . ." Nicholas noted Edwin's tight lips and narrowed eyes, and the slightly crooked smile on Constance's face. It took him a while to figure it out . . . *smugness*, he decided. Yes, that was it!

"Where is she?" Edwin demanded in a too-calm voice.

"Where is who?" Nicholas asked, leaning against the doorframe to project a calm he didn't quite feel.

"Elizabeth."

"Have you tried her apartment?"

Edwin's face went a brilliant shade of red. "Don't get smart with me, Nicholas—we've been there and she's not in there!"

"Well, she's not here. Why would she be? If she's not in her apartment, then she must be off to secretarial college already."

Constance was shaking her head. "We don't believe you."

"If you don't believe me, I'll take you to her." Nicholas shut the door behind him and Constance tried to peer inside as the door shut. Halfway down the hall Nicholas winced, realizing that he'd just left his keys to the apartment, inside. He'd locked himself out. He sighed. "Come on, then . . . I'll prove it to you."

Edwin and Constance joined him inside the elevator, both deadly quiet and radiating skeptical fury. Nicholas cleared his throat in the silence, but said nothing. He wasn't sure what he could say, or where this fresh accusation was coming from.

They stepped out of the elevator and walked out of the building into a refreshing breeze and a bright morning sun. "Beautiful

day," Nicholas said, hoping to lighten the mood. The leaves of nearby trees were rustling gently, their shade flickering across the pavement as branches swayed. Nicholas was crossing the parking lot, but abruptly he stopped and turned to Edwin, as if only just realizing what he'd known all along. "Ah, I forgot to bring my keys—"

"Aha!" Constance pointed a finger in his face. "It's a trick, Edwin! She's inside and he's going to pretend to have locked himself out so he doesn't have to let us in and face the music!"

Nicholas frowned. "Who's pretending? Anyway why don't we just take your car, then? You can drive me there."

Edwin nodded sharply. "All right. Let's go."

Nicholas shrugged as he followed him. He was going to miss a class and he'd have to get the superintendent to let him back into his apartment later, but some things couldn't be helped.

All along the way to the secretarial college in Sea Point, Nicholas was given a stern lecture about the evils of carnal sin and leading their daughter astray. He did his best to deny it all at first, but they wouldn't have any of it, and they dismissed all his objections as yet more lies. Constance painted him as the very worst kind of scum, duplicitous and untrustworthy. When the three of them finally arrived at the college, they went knocking on the door to interrupt Elizabeth's typing class. As Nicholas had predicted, Elizabeth was there. She looked up from her typewriter—along with all the other students—and saw the familiar faces through the glass top half of the door. Looking perplexed, she got up and came to the door. Nicholas noted with satisfaction that Edwin was now looking rather sheepish, although Constance was stoic as ever, still in denial.

Elizabeth was still wearing that puzzled look as she opened the door. "What's wrong?" she asked, looking confused.

Edwin looked like he was choking on a hairball, so Constance spoke. "Hello, dear," she said, giving an enigmatic smile. "We just came by to see if you'd like to join us for brunch."

"Um . . ." Elizabeth cast a quick glance over her shoulder. She received a scathing look from her instructor, so she stepped out into the hall. "What time is it?" She looked at her watch. "I guess I could, if you wait for me to finish here first . . ."

"Fine, we'll wait," Constance said, her smile still in place.

"Well, I'd have to skip my next class. . . ."

"Do so! It's not every day your parents come to Cape Town for a visit. We'll see you in a few minutes then?"

Elizabeth nodded. "I'll be out in fifteen." With that, she disappeared into her classroom once more.

Now Nicholas looked smug. He turned to Constance with his eyebrows raised, winking, "Brunch? And that's why you came?"

"Of course! Why else would we have come? When you willingly came with us here, we knew you were telling the truth, so we decided it's a good opportunity to take our daughter for a meal."

"But it seems rather far to come solely for that reason, and unannounced!" Nicholas said, recalling the long lecture he'd received, wondering how that would fit into her explanation. "And your reasons for coming to see me at my apartment in such a huff was what again?" he said, fishing for an apology from them.

Constance just smiled haughtily at him. "Perhaps we'll make such surprise visits a regular thing. You'd best be on your toes, Strauss." With that, Constance turned and walked down the hall. Nicholas and Edwin watched her disappear into the women's restroom, and then they turned to one another.

Edwin cleared his throat, opened his mouth to say something, and then appeared to stop himself, growing sheepish once more.

Nicholas smiled. "An apology would be in order about right now, Mr. Smythe, but I doubt one will be forthcoming, so let's just call both your and your wife's actions an honest mistake, and leave it at that, shall we?"

"Yes, well . . ." Edwin's gaze drifted off down the hall. After a few moments of silence he turned back to Nicholas. "Hungry?"

Nicholas had a rueful flashback to the peanut butter and jelly sandwich he'd left sitting on the counter in his apartment, and he nodded. "Famished! And rumor has it that you're paying!"

Edwin gave him a sheepish grin "Yes, I'm paying, and lately in more ways than you can ever imagine."

Nicholas found himself feeling sorry for Edwin, *it can't be easy living with a woman like Constance*, he thought.

Chapter 29

The time had flown. Three weeks had gone by in what seemed like a day. Now Elizabeth found herself at the airport with her family. They were there to say goodbye to her father as he went ahead of them to Canada to make arrangements on that side. They'd just eaten a delicious meal at one of Cape Town's many sea-side restaurants, but Elizabeth hadn't been able to enjoy the food. She wouldn't be following her family to Canada for a few years yet. She'd have to endure her family's absence until then. It wasn't going to be easy. Her father had tried to keep the tone of his farewell dinner light, insisting that they should all be happy. They were about to start a new, exciting chapter in their lives! Elizabeth didn't see how it was a happy occasion. She was saying goodbye to her father for maybe as long as three years. How could that be happy? She tried to comfort herself with the knowledge that her parents would come back to visit her. *They'll have to come back for the wedding.* . . . she thought. So it wouldn't quite be three years.

Now as Elizabeth stood in front of her father, with everyone else having said their goodbyes, she found the words sticking in her throat. What could she say? I'll see you soon? Her brave façade began to crumble, but somehow she kept her tears at bay. "Well, Dad," she began "I'm sure going to miss you!"

"Go on, then," Constance interrupted. "Say goodbye to your father, and I promise you this ... if you don't come with Hattie and me when we go, it'll be the last time you ever see him!"

Edwin's eyebrows shot up. Elizabeth turned to her mother in horror and tears welling up in her eyes and began to spill over. She shook her head incredulously. "What are you talking about?"

Constance's lips were pressed into a thin, bloodless line. "You know exactly what I mean. Is this all just a game to you?"

The final call for boarding came, and Edwin glanced quickly over his shoulder. He turned back to his wife and daughter with a helpless look. "I have to go. Don't worry, Elizabeth, everything will be fine. Constance, dear, don't be so melodramatic. Go easy on Elizabeth, for all our sakes, please."

Constance huffed loudly, "Melodramatic!"

"I have to go," Edwin repeated hastily before she got started.

Constance looked ready to explode. Her cheeks puffed out, but nothing happened. In that precarious silence Elizabeth turned back to her father and waved as he backed away. "Goodbye, Dad." Her voice sounded small and childlike. "I'll see you"

He smiled and his brown eyes sparkled at her with a hint of tears he'd never let fall. "Soon," he promised. "Goodbye, Lizzie."

Elizabeth nodded slowly, forcing a smile through her tears.

He turned, and they watched him walk through the doors. Then they all went upstairs to the viewing balcony, and watched as Edwin walked across the tarmac towards the plane and up the stairs. He was the last to go, he turned and waved at them, and the stewardess promptly shut the hatch behind him. They continued watching silently until the stairs were wheeled away.

"I meant what I said Elizabeth," Constance said, looking angrily at her, "I will make sure you never see your dad again if you don't come with Hattie and me when we leave for Canada!"

"But mom, after all that's happened, all the progress that's been made, that's so uncalled for ... and so unfair," Lizzie replied.

"Elizabeth, you know I always get my way. It doesn't matter what your father says. He may resist for a while, but you see that plane taxiing out onto the runway for takeoff? That's exactly the opposite outcome that he and you worked towards!" Constance said with a smirk, adding "And don't you ever forget it, my girl!" Elizabeth just stood there, stunned, as the truth of her mother's words dawned on her. She'd indeed snatched victory from out of the jaws of defeat. But how exactly she had done so, was a still a mystery to her. Elizabeth didn't answer ... she felt torn between the two men in her life. She loved her dad, they'd always shared a special bond, and she loved Nicholas too. He was her future husband. She owed her loyalty to Nicholas now – but why should she have to choose, why couldn't she keep them both in her life?

"Come on, then," Constance said. "Let's get out of here."

The drive back to Elizabeth's apartment was quiet for most of the way - until just before they arrived. "Have you seen what you're doing to your father? He was almost crying, and in public!"

Elizabeth shook her head, refusing to accept blame for that. "We've already discussed this, Mother. We will follow you to Canada after Nicholas finishes his degree. He's promised ..."

Constance snorted. "Oh, and a fine promise that is! Has he even thought to inquire whether Canada would accept him?"

"Well"

"No, he hasn't. I'll tell you why, he has no intention of going!"

"That's not true!"

The car came to a stop in front of Liesbeeck Gardens and Constance reached across the passenger's seat to open the door for Elizabeth. "You know what, Elizabeth?" She waited for her daughter's attention. "When Hattie and I go to the airport, don't even bother to come say goodbye to us. You'll not be welcome!"

Elizabeth shook her head mutely, the tears welling in her eyes again. "But mom—"

"Another thing—I will see to it that you'll never see your dad, again, because you're not worthy of being called our daughter! Go, on!" Constance nodded to the open door. "Get out! Now!"

Elizabeth climbed woodenly from the car and her mother shut the door behind her and drove off. She stood there in shock, watching her family's red Mercedes, the company car due to be returned soon, recede until it was just a glinting red speck in the distance. Even when it was finally out of sight, she didn't move, but stood there still, frozen in the fading light of a fiery red sunset, alone and bereft, the wind rippling through her hair, but every other part of her motionless as a statue. She felt confused and betrayed. She knew her mother well enough to know that she would carry through on her threats. She'd just lost her entire family, forever, and she wasn't exactly sure how it had happened. It had to be some sort of horrible trick. Long shadows fell across the world, and soon she was standing there in the dark with her mother's words echoing through her mind: "*When Hattie and I go to the airport, don't even bother to come and say goodbye to us!*"

With that thought, she sprang into motion, fleeing to the entrance of the apartment building and whatever sanctuary it might provide for her.

* * *

Nicholas was whistling a happy tune as he stepped out of the elevator and onto his floor. He walked with a bouncing stride down the hallway to his apartment, but when he rounded the corner, he saw someone—Elizabeth, unmistakable even from a distance—sitting in the hallway with her back propped against his door. He slowed to stop in front of her. She had her face in her hands, and when she looked up, he was shocked to see all her mascara running down her face in dark, smudgy streaks. "Hi . . ." she said, meekly, her voice nasal.

He bent quickly to one knee and looked her in the eyes. His hand came up to her cheek to trace the line of tears the mascara had left. "What's happened Lizzie? What's wrong?"

She shook her head, trying to smile, but that effort quickly crumbled, and fresh tears welled up in her eyes. He sat down and

enfolded her in a protective hug. "Hey, it's okay," he whispered as she cried, her tears soaking through his shirt. "It's okay," he repeated, rocking her gently in his arms. "What happened?"

"Nothing," she sniffed.

"No, you sitting outside my door and crying is definitely something. Come on, you can tell me. What is it?"

Lizzie proceeded in a broken voice to tell him exactly what had happened at the airport and then afterward as her mother had driven her back and unceremoniously dumped her here.

Nicholas found his anger rising with every word she spoke; he tried to keep it in check, but he was sure it showed clearly on his face. He did his best to trade anger for sympathy, and said, "I'm so sorry, Lizzie. That's . . ." he shook his head. "Well it's just plain old horrid, but you know she's just trying to scare you into going with her, trying to bully you into submitting to her iron-will."

"I know."

"She's backed into a corner and using the only weapons she has left: fear, rejection, and manipulation."

Elizabeth shook her head. "But I don't get it! We're going to follow them to Canada. What more does she want from us?"

Nicholas shrugged. "She doesn't strike me as the sort of woman who bows to compromise. It's her way or the highway."

"Yes, but . . ." Lizzie started to say, pausing and then continuing, "I don't know. I never expected her to be so - so unreasonable. She's . . ." Lizzie looked up as someone passed by.

Nicholas turned and gave a nod to a neighbor he knew by sight but not by name. Once the neighbor had passed, he gave Elizabeth his attention once more and cleared his throat.

"You want to go inside rather?"

She nodded. "Okay."

He stood up and jingled his keys in the lock. Opening the door, he gave Lizzie a hand up and gestured for her to go in first, following as she went inside. As he shut the door behind them and turned around, he found Elizabeth right there, so close, that he felt her breath piling hotly on his lips. Her perfume filled his nostrils with a fresh, floral scent, and the wide, vulnerable look in her blue eyes was just too much for him to resist. He took her face in his hands and kissed her. She kissed him back, softly at first, but then both of them were kissing with a rapidly increasing heat. Soon the pent-up emotions, anger and passion, were trying hard to escape, and now they were backed up against the door. Elizabeth's passion now felt less like anger and more like fury. She kissed him and ran her fingers through his hair until he wasn't sure where he was anymore. His breath came fast and

short, his eyes were shut, and his mind was spinning around him in fragmented chaos. They were in trouble now. But why should they resist any longer? He struggled to remember why, his brain grasping at possible reasons as his hands combed through her long hair and his lips hungrily sought hers. Try as he might, he couldn't seem to gather his thoughts. What he really needed was air! Suddenly he held her at arms' length, and took a step back. Red-faced, hair disheveled, weakly smiling, he slowly shook his head. "Waterfall?" he asked looking for any response from her.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Exactly what's holding us back? It's just you and me now, Nicolas." She said, pleading with him to take her up in his arms again and this time, to make her his wife.

Nicholas picked her up in his arms, carrying her towards the bedroom, then decided to try once more, "Remember uncle Smit's advise the day we went to see him? We need to slow down Lizzie."

But she interrupted, "I don't want to think anymore," she whispered into his ear—no more waterfalls, okay, Nicholas? No more! I'm all done with waterfalls now ... I want to belong to you. I have no one else left in my world to belong to right now – please Nicholas ... I really need to belong to you, make me your wife."

Nicholas looked deeply into her eyes, displaying all of that love and rage, pent-up, passionate fury—now turned into intense desire. He could maybe contain some of it—but she just didn't seem to care anymore. She knew they would soon be married, so what now? He was tempted, for a moment, but something didn't feel right—then he had it! Putting her gently down onto his bed, he knelt beside her and took her face into his hands, "Lizzie, right now you're hurting and feeling alone, rejected and angry. But why let our first intimate moment, ever, be decided by your mother? We'll never get to do it over again. We're just about to hand her a major victory here—we just can't do that! We'll be married soon enough, I promise. Let's decide—just you and me, when and where that all important, first intimate moment will be for us—it's none of her bloody business! Besides, every time we think back to that moment, for the rest of our lives, we'll be haunted by her actions and words instead of fondly remembering our first intimate loving moment as a couple together. Do you want that?"

Elizabeth hesitated; her hands found his and squeezed, *hard*. She seemed for a moment ready to ignore his objections; but then instead she pulled him down onto her, her arms hugging him tightly, her face buried up against his chest. Soon he could feel his shirt growing wet, and not long after, her silent tears became heart-rending sobs, and all of her pent-up emotions burst forth as if a dam had been breached. He just held her tightly against

him and let her cry. For a long moment there seemed to be nothing else either of them could say; they just lay there, her body shaking both of them with each sob. Nicholas tried to focus her on taking slow, steady breaths, stroking her hair and back, whispered in her ears that everything was going to be all right, meanwhile desperately hoping that was going to be true. As he rested his chin on top of her head, his gaze was drawn into the inscrutable darkness beyond the windows of the bedroom.

Abruptly Elizabeth interrupted his thoughts, "And when exactly will that be, Nicholas?"

"Hmmm? When exactly will what be Lizzie?"

They parted just enough to look into each other's eyes.

"Us," she said. "When will we be married?"

He hunched his shoulders and shook his head. "It would've been nice to marry before your parents left, but . . ." he didn't need to finish that sentence. Lizzie knew just as well as he did that Constance had often promised them, time and again, whenever the subject had been raised: *"Just wait. Once we move, once the financial pressure is off us, you'll have that big, white wedding you've always wanted."* But now that Lizzie's father had left, and her mother and sister weren't far behind, it seemed to Nicholas more like a trick—especially considering her mother's latest pressure tactics—but right now wasn't the most appropriate moment to raise those concerns.

Elizabeth searched his eyes carefully. "When?" she insisted.

He shook his head. "I don't know, Lizzie, but I've this sinking feeling that your mother's just playing for time - that we'll have to take matters into our own hands one day ... maybe real soon!"

She seemed happy now with his reassurance. Maybe they should decide now—what's to lose? Her mother had already as much as told her to get lost—that she had no family anymore. She winced just thinking about her mother's cruel words—the look on her face, both at the airport and later in the road below.

Nicholas enfolded her in another hug and kissed the top of her head. "Let's not worry about that just yet. Come on, you look tired. You've had a long, hard day. Put your head on my shoulder." She lay against him, wrapped in his arms, still sniffing involuntarily. After a while Elizabeth sighed. "Nicholas, why is it that nothing ever seems to work out for us? I mean, long-term?"

"Some things do," he said, remembering their reunion on the beach in Siesta. "Hey, at least we're together and we're engaged now. Who would have thought, hey? As for the rest, it's not so unusual to have these kinds of problems ... I guess?"

"Oh? Really? You think this isn't unusual?"

"Well, ok, it's kind of weird. I think it's because your mother still thinks you're her little girl and that you'll do whatever she says, but here you are insisting that you're an adult now. I think all parents go through that test at some point. Someone's got to give in, and since you can't travel back in time and be her little girl again, I can already tell who it'll have to be."

Elizabeth was quiet for a while, and Nicholas waited patiently for her reply. After a few minutes of waiting, at last, she spoke, her voice a slow, sleep-dusted whisper. "But my mother never gives in, Nicholas. Never has . . . never will!"

Nicholas contemplated her words in the ensuing silence. He felt sure that Elizabeth was already asleep, so he didn't voice his thoughts, but they hadn't brought him to a happy place. *Constance has to give in. What other choice does she have?*

* * *

It was Saturday afternoon, just weeks before summer vacation, and the shopping center was so crowded that the lines to the cash registers were backed up into the aisles. Nicholas winced as he stepped into the shortest line he could find. He should have known better than to go shopping on a Saturday, let alone the Saturday before everyone was heading on vacation, but he and Elizabeth were also going somewhere. They were going to join his family in Siesta, and his mother had asked him to bring some extra supplies. So it was that he found himself shuffling slowly down the line, his mind drifting off in a thousand directions at once. He had final exams all of last week, and soon he'd have his vacation, too. It would be a welcome end to his first year.

"Nicholas?"

He turned toward the voice, recognition filtering through to his brain only when they were face to face. "Mrs. Smythe?"

Constance replied, "Fancy meeting you here." she smirked.

"Yes," he said, frowning. "Fancy that. What are you still doing in Cape Town?" His eyes skipped to Hattie who was standing to one side, almost hidden behind her mother.

Constance waved a hand. "Oh, we had some business to take care of at the embassy, and I thought that while we were waiting I may as well do one last shop before we leave—for *Canada*," she said, holding his gaze carefully as she emphasized that last part.

"Yes, that's coming up soon, isn't it?"

"It is. Very soon." She took a step toward him, and he felt a sudden urge to take a step back. "You know, Nicholas, this is all going to be very hard on Elizabeth. She's losing her entire family."

He grimaced. "I thought you made it clear to her that she has already lost her family?" he shot back.

"Well, maybe, but that depends on her now," she shot back.

Nicholas looked suspiciously at her. "By depends, you mean she'd better meet all of your demands—or else?" he inquired.

"Yes, exactly. I'm glad at least you understand what's at stake now," Constance said, as coolly and calmly as she could.

"You're forgetting that Elizabeth has decided to stay with me until I've graduated. I appreciate her sacrifice and it will make mine easier when the time comes to repay her, for her sacrifices."

Constance shook her head. "That time is already here." Then looking him squarely in the eyes, in her best attempt yet to stare him down, she said: "Nicholas, if you really love Elizabeth, and I think you do, then you'll let her go ... it's really for her own good!"

"I don't think—"

"No, you don't, do you, but it's true. You'll see!" Pausing, Constance added, "If you do, it will prove that your love for her was real. If you don't, it will soon destroy her—and you'd have been responsible! As for me, I wash my hands off of this matter."

With that, Constance turned away and started down the aisle. "Come on, Hattie, we still have shopping to do." Hattie turned and began pushing their cart along behind her mother.

Nicholas found himself frowning at their backs as they walked off without so much as a wave goodbye. He watched until they reached the end of the aisle and turned to walk down the next. He shook his head and turned away. The more he had to deal with Elizabeth's mother, the more uneasy he felt. There was always something hiding deep within any of her words and actions. Nothing was ever straightforward or simple. She always had an agenda, and everything she did was carefully planned to further that agenda. Clearly she hadn't given up on getting Elizabeth to follow them to Canada *now*, rather than later. But Constance had already lost that fight, so why was she still clinging to it? Elizabeth had made her choice. She would stay with him until he graduated. In return, he would give up everything he'd ever known, for her, and they'd follow her parents to Canada. They both had sacrifices to make. Their relationship would be stronger for it. He wasn't going to let Elizabeth go. The very thought of it was absurd. He'd had to do that often enough already, and he wasn't going to do it again. There was no need to; he'd won her heart. She was his, and he was hers. And as soon as he could reasonably expect Constance to keep her promise, he would demand that she give Elizabeth the wedding she so rightfully deserved, or he would find a way to do it for her!

Chapter 31

“Mom, Lizzie and I are heading out to spend Christmas Eve canoeing upriver, and we’re taking some camping supplies with us, so please don’t worry—expect us back early Sunday morning—Christmas morning,” Nicholas said to his mom as she was getting ready for the annual Christmas Eve dinner dance at the Holiday Inn that Saturday night in 1977.

“All right, dear, enjoy it, but please do be careful! We feel responsible now that her parents are so far away in Canada,” Kathleen warned, and then added, “However, I think it will be a very good distraction for her, as that’s very much your and her private domain. Here there are just too many ghosts of Christmases gone by for Elizabeth. Her wounds are still raw—they need time to heal, and neutral ground can only help her.”

“I will mom. Enjoy the dance and dinner with Dad,” he replied.

* * *

Nicholas had gone to Mr. Nixon to rent one of his yellow fiberglass canoes, now that “Cheers” was no longer in South Africa.

But instead, Mr. Nixon had said “Take and use it for as long as you need it, Nicholas—regard it as my gift to help true love.”

Nicholas thanked Mr. Nixon, and later went with Lizzie to buy all their usual camping supplies in his store, the Duka. After that they went on down to the canoe, steering well clear of Lizzie’s family’s old camp site, happily chatting away as they prepared for their night out in their secret place. This time, they would only return on Christmas morning. Kathleen was right. Lizzie was excited. It was a welcome diversion from all of the stress and strain of her parent’s move to Canada. As she sat in the front of the canoe, in her pale blue bikini and loose cheese-cloth shirt, she smiled at Nicholas—rowing them steadily away from Siesta towards the railway bridge. He’d timed it for the afternoon train, which was on time. They heard its whistle approaching, he slowed his rowing to let the canoe glide towards the bridge. Right on cue, the train started across the bridge and the engineer, seeing them, waved. But this time he did not blow his whistle—he just tipped his cap to them. The 7 wishes they’d been granted 4 years ago on

their first Christmas Eve excursion, and it seemed, was all they would ever get. On their last excursion, they'd used up their 3rd and 4th wish, so tonight they'd get to make their 5th and 6th wish.

Elizabeth looked happy, sitting there as the train disappeared. "Nicholas, come on, let's go. I can't wait to get back to our secret place! I'm so glad your parents consented to us spending the night there, together. It will be fun. Our first night together, ever! And back there again!" she said, smiling radiantly.

"Yes Lizzie, we both need that. It's been such a happy place for us. But first, I need to look along the banks for something."

Lizzie smiled. She knew exactly what he was looking for!

After a while, Nicholas saw a patch of white Calla lilies along the banks of the river, steered towards them, picked Elizabeth the best one, and reaching over, handed it to her.

"Just for you, Elizabeth. Adding up all of the flowers I've picked for you here, through the years, I'd say that by now you've had a full bridal bouquet of these!" he said to her, with a wink.

Elizabeth's face beamed happiness as she smiled, stroking the white lily. She gave it a gentle kiss then replied, "Thank you, Nicholas! You, these lilies, our canoe trips up this river and our secret place have been the only constant, happy things in my life for so long now ... I've come to depend on them for my wellbeing."

Nicholas felt a lump growing in his throat—but he was determined not to show her too much pity, or let the mood of their special time together change by feeding any negative feelings, so instead he forced a smile onto his face and said, "Lizzie, we're together and importantly, we're off to spend the first full night together ever, camping out in the forest at our waterfall. Isn't that just the most exciting, adult thing we've ever done?"

It worked! Elizabeth looked up at him, clearly excited, replying, "Yes Nicholas, and I'm sure, just like all the other times we've been there—we're going to have a memorable time tonight!" With that, Nicholas dug the oars in deeper and pulled hard, doing his best to get there faster! They were alone again, in a place that her parents, or his, or Charles had never been to, so this was very much their very own private hideaway. Siesta wasn't that private.

Now, as they approached the final bend in the river, they could hear the muffled sound of falling water, and both felt their hearts racing with anticipation. Then there it was, waiting to welcome them back as it always did, their waterfall, with it's surrounding pool, rocks, little sandy cove, steep mountains, dense trees and flowers. Then they both noticed it right next to a fallen tree on the one side of their little sandy beach . . . white Arum Lilies growing there at the water's edge.

"Oh, Nicholas! Look . . . specially for us!" Elizabeth gushed.

"Wow, Lizzie. I couldn't have planned for this—else maybe I'd have waited and picked one here for you," he replied, smiling.

They beached their canoe, and got out, stretching themselves first, then walking over to the log protecting the clump of white Lilies, oohing and aahing over them, but not picking any.

Then they returned to the canoe, removing their camping supplies, each taking a can of Mountain Dew, then sitting down on the soft, cool sand, opening their drinks, and chatting away excitedly like teenagers in love—except that now they were adults! The distinction did not seem to force them to be any more reserved, or any less enthusiastic, instead they were just perfectly relaxed and happy, as if their secret place demanded it from them. Here in this remote oasis, surrounded by steep green walls, backed up to the cliff over which the waterfall gushed, with only one narrow way in, or out, it was the most natural thing for them to be happy, in love, secure.

After a while, Nicholas got up, saying, "Lizzie, while the sun's still up, let's go for our first swim, shall we. She smiled. Soon he and Lizzie were removing their shirts and walking, hand in hand, into their pool. As the water covered their waist lines, they let go of each other's hands, and dove in, emerging together in the middle of the pool, treading water next to each other. Soon Lizzie tired, then putting her arms around his neck whispered into his ear, "Save me oh noble knight, for I'm weary and may sink below the waters. Swim with me, over to yonder rocks by the waterfall's edge, that together we may sit there and rest, to talk, to love, to dream—to gather our strength again for the year that lies ahead."

Nicholas swam the breast stroke with Lizzie's arms loosely around his neck, and she floating gently on his broad shoulders and back, and reached the flat rocks at the pool's edge. Then rising up out of the waters, he took Lizzie's hand and pulled her up next to him. There they sat, leaning back on their hands, their legs dangling in the refreshing waters of the pool, surveying their surroundings and, as always, chatting away, happily.

Lizzie turned to Nicholas, looked into his eyes, and said, "Nicholas, thank you for being there for me—through thick and thin, good and bad, happy and sad. Do you know that I love you—so much!" She added, "Have I told you that lately?"

Nicholas was a little amused, but mostly relieved. The old Lizzie was back! "Yes, kind of - but really not enough of late."

"Well let me fix that right now!" she said, as she moved to sit on his lap facing him, her legs locked behind his back, her arms around his neck, leaning forward so that her face was now barely

an inch away from his. Nicholas stopped leaning backwards on his hands, and moved upright, locking his arms around her back, gently moving her back into a more upright position. She touched his nose with hers - then, with her lips slightly parted, the tip of her tongue caressed her lips invitingly. Nicholas couldn't resist anymore, and moved his lips over hers as she tilted her head slightly sideways. Before long they were caught in a passionate kiss—an embrace from which, it seemed, neither wanted to ever escape. Nicholas felt himself giving in now, overwhelmed by the evidence of Lizzie's passion. His head was spinning, and he felt his hands drifting lower, till they gently glided over Lizzie's thin, soft, smooth, pale blue bikini bottom. He felt her relax. She wasn't stopping him—something had better do that, and fast! But there was nothing stopping them now. Neither of them spoke, or even whispered their secret word. It seemed that neither of them even wanted to. Nicholas kissed her more passionately than ever before, and she was returning his kisses just as passionately - as if all of her sadness, all of her anger, her fury, her pent-up emotions from these many months of turmoil, were now being transformed by their secret place into passionate, unhindered love, and all of it was now directed to and focused on him. Nicholas not only welcomed her eager response to his advances, he encouraged it. It felt so natural - after all, this was true, loving intimacy, all on their terms—on their private turf, and since they were long since engaged, it even seemed legitimate. Lizzie took his head in her hands, her fingers and nails now playing through his hair, and kissed him, and kissed him ... and kissed him—hungrily, overwhelming him and her, spurred on by his hands now pulling her tighter into him. All the time, their waterfall looked on, seemingly powerless to stop them. Whatever had held them back throughout the years was now no longer able to. Both of them were primed for that pivotal moment in their lives—a moment that ever only happens once for any couple—their first moment of adult intimacy was upon them and nothing could stop it now—not their surroundings, feelings of guilt, fears of a lack of commitment to each other - not even the lack of the apartheid government's official paperwork declaring them married. Nothing!

Nicholas turned sideways, moving Lizzie, still strategically supported by his hands, and laying her gently down on the warm flat rock, on her back, whilst still kissing her. Her breath came in short quick bursts now, her heart racing, her breasts rising and falling while Nicholas kissed her neck, repeatedly, hungrily, moving lower . . . suddenly, a loud, urgent, rasping, croaking sound pieced through their consciousness, shouting down at

them, and then that was quickly joined by another—not in unison, rather a cacophony of shrill rebukes! Lizzie and Nicholas opened their eyes in shock—what had disturbed them so loudly, so close to them during their pivotal moment of passion? Was it dangerous? Did it threaten them? Nicholas looked up and Lizzie twisted around to look back at the trees above and behind them from where the noise was coming. There, sitting on a branch, mere feet away from them, were two adult Knysna Loeries, big, beautiful green and red, parrot-like birds—clearly a mating pair, that sat there looking at them, scolding them with their parrot-like squawks, quit unfazed by the presence of the human love birds in their home. Turning their heads sideways, they blinked, then opening their beaks wide again, first one, but soon also the other, emitting their noisy scolding songs of caution once more—not even in any kind of harmony! Nicholas gave them as cross a look as he could muster. “Damn noisy, nosey birds! Go away!” he scolded them. “Just because you’re long since married, doesn’t mean that you have the right to interfere here with Lizzie and I!”

Elizabeth burst into laughter, and nothing could stop her.

Nicholas, now resigned to the loss of the most perfect moment they’d ever enjoyed, collapsed next to her on the rock, clicking his tongue and shaking his head in disbelief. Lizzie’s laughter was infectious, and soon she was writhing with laughter next to him, her chest heaving, shaking as she laughed, her arms grasping her stomach, clearly now aching. He started laughing too—really, what other option was there? Without a doubt, their momentary lapse, their most vulnerable moment, even in this most loving, perfect, private setting, had ceased to be viable. Their job done, the love birds, obviously in cahoots with the protective waterfall, took flight. Flying low over the water, they glided along the river, following its course around the bend and disappeared from view.

“Well, Mr. Strauss, I guess I can rightly say that my virtue was rescued in the nick of time, and that I was *saved by the birds!*”[∂]

Nicholas laughed, rather sheepishly, and just hugged Lizzie. The warmth of the bond between them was clearly evident, but their moment of dangerous passion had passed—for now, so instead they just lay there basking in the warmth of the late afternoon sun, and of their love for each other. Lizzie ran her fingers over his bare chest, lightly, as she tucked her head into his shoulder. Nicholas lay back, looking up at the blue sky, clearly still amused, but happy, and remarked, “Just goes to

[∂] See: <http://youtu.be/5MSaagypuhw> for a video of a Knysna Loerie mating pair.

show Lizzie, we don't have to go that far - I mean, we don't have to be sexually intimate to be happy and in love! Mind you, I cannot yet speak from experience, so I'm kind of speculating here. Still, you and I have always managed to be very much in love and blissfully happy, without having crossed the fine-line from which, I gather, there seems to be no return, ever," he quickly clarified.

Lizzie lifted her head slightly from his shoulder and then she looked sideways at him, before replying. "I guess we would have known, by now, if your words of wisdom were real or mere fantasy, Nicholas ... were it not for the timely intervention of an older married couple. I guess he was trying to warn you about the inevitable consequences—you know, nest building, sitting on eggs, feeding hungry, needy little chicks all day," Lizzie said laughing. "I'm not even sure I'm quite ready for all that yet either, and I daresay—and I'm just guessing, but neither are you!" she joked, poking Nicholas in the ribs with her elbow and winking.

Nicholas thought for a while, then replied soberly, "You know Lizzie, I never plan these things, and neither do you, it seems. As a result, here's me, a doctor's son no less, without any condoms, and here's you, not even on the pill, or whatever. We're a ticking time bomb Lizzie, just one passionate moment away from the reality of premature parenthood. I think we're going to have to do something to adjust our strategy that's worked so well for us till now, to avoid the outcome that seems to have tripped up so many young people like us, and I'm open to any suggestions you may have as to just how we can both do that," Nicholas concluded, deferring to Lizzie. For once he was at a creative loss for answers.

Lizzie thought for a while, and then hugged him before she spoke. "Nicholas, I love you. Clearly you love me too. We've been living close to each other for an entire year now—for several months in the same apartment building, across from each other. We've been sweethearts since we were sweet 16. You're now 21, and in 2 months I'll be 21 too. We've been engaged for almost a year. If it were up to us, entirely, we'd have been married already and living in one apartment, not two. Our love has weathered so many storms Nicholas, it's passed so many tests, and still I'd sooner die than not be here with you, lying in your arms ..."

Before Lizzie could go on, Nicholas gave her a kiss on her cheek, whispering in her ear "Me too, Lizzie,—me too!"

But Lizzie persisted. "I have to be totally honest with you. There's something building up so strong in me now, wanting so desperately to belong with someone again—to feel part of a family, that if I could wave a magic wand, if somehow we had some money, I'd insist we get married right away, move in together, and

I'd lovingly submit all of myself to you, body and soul, so that you and I could become one—soul mates forever! If it so happened that a love child ensued from such a loving encounter, I'd not complain. I want to be your wife, Nicholas. I want to have children with you. Do you find that so disturbing?" Elizabeth said, turning to kiss him, her warm breath feeling hot on his cool cheek.

"Lizzie . . ." Nicholas replied. Were it not for those two nosey, noisy, feathered trouble-makers, you may have soon got some of the things on your wish list, but realistically, not yet all of them. So we still have to be somewhat careful—you know, like uncle Smitt warned us. I guess he's seen a lot of failures in his job as a judge. We need to heed his advice—so let's keep thinking here, shall we? Let's get creative again, as we once did. We're definitely in the home stretch now, I just know we are Lizzie!" Nicholas added, reassuringly. Now the sun was setting fast, painting the surrounding sky pink, red, orange and purple—a fast-changing kaleidoscope of colors, and shadows loomed over the valley's sides, the trees colored ever darker shades of green.

"Ok, Mr. Smarty Pants," Lizzie replied. "Just what are you suggesting we do - so that you get to keep your pants on?" she giggled, pulling at his now dry, loose, long swimming trunks.

Nicholas chuckled at Lizzie's candor. "Well, how about this?" He suggested. "How about we agree, right here tonight, on Christmas Eve, on a deadline for us to get married?" quickly adding, "We can always get married sooner—but never later!"

Elizabeth wasn't expecting that! She gasped, her mouth open. "That's an excellent idea, Nicholas! Go on, I'm all ears, make your suggestion, but I reserve the right to veto it!" she replied, winking.

"Well, we met on Tuesday the 21st of December of 1971. So counting forward from there, if we add 7 years, 7 months and 7 days to that . . . Well let me see now, that's 1979, 7 Months after December is . . . July . . . 7 days later the 21st is the 28th. OK, so how about this. Lizzie, we must get married, on or before the 28th of July 1979—more or less 18 months from now. That's around university mid-year vacations, and only months before I graduate anyway, and can start working. What do you think about that plan Lizzie?" Nicholas asked, looking intently at her face.

"So long? Do we have to wait so long?" Lizzie asked, pouting.

"No, that's the very latest we can wait, but if it so happens that a better, earlier date presents itself, I'm okay with that!" he said.

"And who gets to decide?" Lizzie inquired, smiling coyly at him.

"Well Lizzie, since I got to choose the latest possible date for our wedding; I'll concede that right entirely to you. The ball is now squarely in your court. Choose *any* date between now and then,

and I will not try and talk you out of it. I'll just be there!" he said.

Lizzie gave him an excited hug, hugging him as tightly as she could, whilst smiling and joyfully proclaimed: "Oh, how I love you, Nicholas Strauss! I will so choose the day that I'm to become Mrs. Elizabeth Strauss, and I'll be sure to let you know, with time to spare, so that you can be there by my side!" then hastily added, "and if you're not, I shall return to die, right here, on this very rock of a broken heart! So please don't you ever let me down . . . "

"I'd sooner die than betray your love, Lizzie. You can count on me to be there ... and, I feel exactly the same as you."

"Nicholas," Lizzie said. "Do you realize how many important decisions we've made right here over the years . . . and floating on this river in a canoe?" Then she continued as he pondered what she'd said, "and we still each have a wish to make here tonight!"

"Yes, Nicholas said. It's been a very special, secret place, when one day we move to Canada, I sure will miss it, Lizzie! I cannot lie to you—but I think you will too?" he replied, inquiringly.

Lizzie hadn't thought about that. Suddenly moving to Canada sounded scary—unsettling. "Oh no!" she said, "I sure will too!" ^ᵂ

* * *

Constance was taking off her make up when Edwin entered the bathroom to brush his teeth next to her. He finished, and then stood there for a while next to her, looking as if he wanted to say something. Finally he scraped up the courage, cleared his throat and spoke. "Dear, I'm not really very happy with your strategy regarding Nicholas and Elizabeth—I think we should modify it a bit. It could well blow up in our faces and then we'll not get the desired result." Edwin said, wincing as he spoke.

Constance turned to glare at him, holding a cotton ball in one hand, interrupting her routine. "Oh, and I suppose you have a better idea? Isn't it exactly because of you that we're in this fine mess right now? And you want me to take your advice again—I mean really, Edwin!" she replied, condescendingly.

"But dear, I've told you, saying no to them getting engaged, when they clearly love each other, was not a good option"

Constance interrupted him, "Love? What makes you think that any of Lizzie's wild, romantic fantasies are actually love? No, it's

^ᵂ See: <http://youtu.be/y9zyhSSRsgQ> which back in the 1970's had no hiking trails and was accessible only by canoe. In those days the river was dammed up artificially at its mouth where it usually entered the sea, to facilitate power-boat use and other water sports, backing the river up into the canyons, making it possible to reach deep into the jungle with minimal effort using a canoe. Now there are well-kept boardwalks and trails to the waterfall - it's a very popular place!

just childish dreams on her part, I mean, she was not quite 16 yet when she met Nicholas—how can it be love?” and then added, “No! We’ve tried it your way, and where’s our daughter tonight? Ready to share Christmas here with her family? No, she’s with the Strauss family in Siesta, I’ll guarantee you that much!”

“Yes, most likely, but not sending any letter or card from us is cruel. We can still make some excuse about that, and call Mr. Nixon’s house to ask to speak with Lizzie. I’m sure she’s missing us right now, being there for the first time without us. I miss her, even if you don’t, and I’d like to wish her a Merry Christmas.”

Once again Constance interrupted, glaring at him, “Edwin, I said we’ll do things my way from now on! You had your chance, and you blew it. We’re in Canada, and Elizabeth is still in South Africa. We need to change that, soon!” she said, adding, “I’m not going to discuss this again, so just accept it ... okay!”

* * *

Nicholas and Lizzie finally tired of sitting on that hard, flat rock, in the dark, and swam back to their camp site together. There, under the cover of dark, they took off their costumes, but this time each didn’t bother to request that the other avert their gaze, silhouettes being rather titillating, but hardly revealing. They dried themselves off with their towels, and then, still excitedly chattering away, they both got dressed in blue-jeans and shirts. Lizzie used the towel to dry as much of her hair as possible, then took a large comb, and sitting there on the open sleeping bag, combed her long strands of hair, turning her head sideways as she did, to chat to Nicholas. As before, this Christmas Eve was fast shaping up to be even better than the previous one. There seemed to be a pattern to this . . . and she confided that theory to Nicholas. He thought about it for a while, and then pointed up to the newly-risen moon. She looked up, still forcing the comb through her long hair, holding her hair with one hand, combing it with the other, asking: “What do you mean, Nicholas? What’s the full moon got to do with it?”

“Plenty!” He answered. “Do you recall our first Christmas Eve wish here in 1973—I mean, do you recall how it looked then?”

“Yes,” Lizzie replied, “For that first Christmas Eve wish, there was no moon,” she replied. “It was completely dark—only stars!”

“Yes, correct!” Nicholas replied. “Then, two years later, when we met and wished again here, after thinking we’d lost each other and our love forever, can you recall how it looked that night?”

“Yes,” She replied. “It was a half moon. I think it’s called that?”

“Correct again, Lizzie! Half moon is probably close enough,” he said, and then continued. “So with tonight’s full moon out for

this, our third Christmas Eve wish, back here, together, our love is now complete—full, like that moon,” he said pointing up at it brightly shining down on them, the pool, the valley and trees, even illuminating the waterfall. Then he added, “Our young love has matured, Lizzie. We’re getting married, ready to love forever!”

Lizzie laughed. “You’re a hopeless romantic, Nicholas, don’t ever change . . . I love that about you!” she said, as she reached over and pulled him towards her. “Come, let’s lie down together and look up at the stars. It’s time to contemplate what our last wish each, as Elizabeth Smythe and Nicholas Strauss, will be.”

Nicholas settled in next to her, letting her snuggle up tightly against him, her wet hair now fragrant—so close to his nose.

“Ok, but first, let’s review our wishes, shall we?” Nicholas said.

Lizzie volunteered the answers. “Our first two wishes have only kind of come true. Yes, we’re here together, in each other’s arms, and I’m with my true love!” she said stroking his nose with her finger, “but not in a place like this for the entire year yet, so those wishes are still quite far from coming true.” Then she hastily continued, “and as for my next wish, right after we’d met again when you were still in the air force, I believe it went something like this: *“I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight . . . that I will marry my true love, regardless of whom my mother thinks, for me, is right.”*”

“I’d have to say now, that taken along with our engagement and the deal we struck tonight, my wish is well on its way to fruition,” Lizzie declared confidently.

Nicholas interrupted, “Yes Lizzie, I’d say it will come true—I sure hope and pray it comes true!” he added as an afterthought, “So now for my wish from that last Christmas Eve—*I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight . . . that I will only ever be engaged to, and marry, one woman - my true love, regardless of whom Lizzie’s mother thinks, for her, is right.* I’d say most of it has come true already, and the one and only remaining detail of that wish, I’ve left entirely up to you now! So, Lizzie, please tell me when will my wish come true?” Nicholas asked, squeezing Lizzie’s hand. “No pressure—when exactly do we get married Lizzie . . . when? Huh, huh, when?” he said teasing her.

Lizzie laughed nervously “Touché,” she said. “I guess that’s what I’ve been sounding like of late. Okay, I’ll have to give it some thought, but for now you’re off the hook—I’ll let you know when I’ve made up my mind.” She said, thinking to herself, *Yikes! So this is what it felt like for poor Nicholas. I’ll have to find a way to make it up to him one day.* Lizzie smiled, cuddling closer.

Chapter 31

Johann and Kathleen had just returned to their table after a waltz, and were chatting as they walked. They were sitting at a table with Mr. Nixon and his new wife—having remarried a widow last year after many years of being a widower himself.

The two women were chatting away about this or that. Johann turned to Mr. Nixon. “George, I have a favor to ask of you.”

“Sure, Doc, anything I can do for you, I will. You’ve helped me out many times with medical emergencies in the park through the many years and I really appreciate that!” he replied.

“Well, as you know, we have Elizabeth Smythe staying with us, Nicholas’ girlfriend. Her parents are now in Ontario, Canada. I’ll gladly pay you whatever you deem is fair, but I’d really like her to make a call to them on Boxing Day, to wish them all a Merry Christmas. Her mother has placed her into Coventry in an attempt to break her spirit. The stress is beginning to take its toll on her,” Johann said, “I’d like to give them a chance to contact her from Canada tomorrow, first, just in case I’m wrong on this.”

“Oh no, that’s so very cruel!” George remarked, adding “Mind you, I’ve come to know her as a real piece of work—poor Edwin. He sure is long suffering!” Mr. Nixon said, shaking his head.

“No kidding, George, I’ve had to step in a few times and rescue that poor man from her scathing tongue, just so that he can at least hold his head up in public,” Johann replied, chuckling.

Mr. Nixon shook his head. “I have a niece in Toronto that I call once a year or so, Doc. The time difference is about seven hours, depending on the time of year. Get Elizabeth to come to my house at around three—that will be eight am in the morning there.”

“Thanks, George! I owe you one.” Johann said, raising his glass to meet Mr. Nixon’s, which was already half way up to his mouth.

* * *

With Christmas carols softly playing, they lay there in each other’s arms, on their little beach, with several citronella-oil candles lit and placed in a circle all around them, to ward off any mosquitoes intent on a feast, still looking up at the stars.

“Elizabeth . . .” Nicholas began “Have I told you lately how very much I love you and how grateful I am that you stayed with me

and didn't abandon me, or our love, and move to Canada?"

Lizzie snuggled in closer to him, smiling, using the arm she'd placed over his chest to give him a hug "No, not in the last hour or so. Please feel free to reassure me again, and again!" she joked.

"Well I do love you, Lizzie, and I'm really grateful that you elected to stay with me in Cape Town. I know that must have been very tough—I've had to face those issues as a little boy when I was sent to boarding school, but at least I knew I'd return home every three to four months for a brief visit. Canada is pretty far away, but I'll take you there when I graduate and you will get to live close to your family again, you'll see," he reassured her.

"It's alright, Nicholas. As long as I can send and get letters back from time to time, and as long as my dad writes a footnote in those letters, I'll manage till then. Thanks for that sacrifice! I'll never forget what you are willing to do for me, ever!" she said.

"Well, Lizzie, we both have and will still sacrifice. We do what we do because we love each other. That's the right motivation."

"Yes, Nicholas . . . but truth be known, I'm really going to Canada to help my dad cope. We've got a pact, he and I. On our own we're easy prey for my mother, but together we're a tag team that she cannot easily defeat. Were it not for him, I'd not bother going even to Canada at all, and I'd not drag you there either." Elizabeth said, adding, "I mean, where my mother's concerned, I'm a lot safer right here— even with Apartheid crumbling, and as you know, that's saying a lot!" Lizzie said, sighing deeply.

Nicholas shuddered. *Yes, some terrorists were probably nicer people*, he thought, *At least Nelson Mandela and his cohorts were principled people. They were willing to risk their lives for their loved ones, to give up everything for them, and not just always demand the reverse of people ... like Constance was so often wont to do!"*

"Oh well, Lizzie, how about we focus on our wishes for our future now . . . I mean, for once you and I can actually say, with confidence, that we actually have a future now!" He suggested.

"Sounds wonderful Nicholas—you first," she said, sleepily.

Nicholas looked up at the stars and moon, then at Lizzie, and he made his wish known, *"Star light, star bright, the first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight . . . that as long as we live, we'll never ever spend any Christmas Eve apart, regardless of what her mother thinks for us is right!"*

Lizzie sighed a happy sigh, kissing Nicholas before turning over onto her back and looking up at the stars. Then she too made her final wish: *"Star light, star bright, the first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have this wish I wish tonight . . . that one day soon I'll marry my true love and give him strong, healthy sons,*

to take his name and love me too – and please help me to love them all, as long as I live, with a love that’s both true and right!”

Nicholas felt a lump forming in his throat, as he realized that Lizzie was wishing for herself to be a mother quite unlike her own mother—clearly she had just wished to be a loving, kind, caring and unselfish mother—everything her mother wasn’t!

He swallowed past the lump in his throat to speak. “Lizzie, I just know you’ll be the best mom and wife imaginable!”

She smiled sleepily, turning to snuggle into his neck again, and then he pulled the other open sleeping bag up over them, till just the tops of their heads peeked out, kissing her cheek and saying: “Goodnight, dearest Lizzie, sweet dreams, my true love.”

He felt her nuzzling his neck, whispering in his ear, “Hold me close to your heart, Nicholas, and please, never ever let me go,” then she relaxed in his arms as sleep overtook her. Nicholas lay awake for a while longer, wondering how he’d ever be able to live without her love, then sighed—a happy sigh, as he realized he’d never have to say goodbye to Lizzie, ever again. With that welcome thought, and to the sounds of their waterfall and the sweet music of Christmas carols, he fell into a happy sleep. Somewhere in the surrounding sub-tropical forest, a pair of lovebirds snuggled up close to each other, with eyes closed, their feathers all fluffed up.

* * *

“Good morning, Nicholas! Merry Christmas!” Lizzie said with an exuberant tone, smiling widely, her towel still in her hands, her wet hair dripping water onto Nicholas’s sleepy face.

Nicholas awoke to see Lizzie kneeling above him in her bikini, dripping wet, showering him with water and kisses. He reached up and put his arms around her, pulling her down on top of him, just so that he could hold her and feel her there with him.

“Merry Christmas, Lizzie,—do you realize this is the first morning I’ve woken up with you?” He said, “I love you, Lizzie!”

“I love you too, Nicholas . . . and I’ve been awake for an hour already. I snuck out of your arms to have a shower under our waterfall—it’s so refreshing, it really wakes one up!” she announced, asking him “Why not come and join me there. We can have a shower together before we head back to Siesta.”

* * *

“Maybe they just forgot,” Nicholas said, rubbing her back.

Elizabeth looked up at him. Her gaze held a crushing weight of sadness that she somehow couldn’t share. Nicholas thought he understood. Some pain was too much to share. If you had to express it, then it would get out, and once it was out, there’d be no bottling it ever again. Some things were safer with a lid on

them. In Lizzie's mind, she'd lost her dad, her mother and Hattie. Elizabeth had sent a Christmas card to her parents' address in Canada, airmail, long before her mother had even left. She'd hoped it would arrive long before Christmas. In the same way, she'd assumed a card from her family would have already arrived for her too. This was to be her first Christmas without her family. Instead, she was spending it with Nicholas and his family.

They'd tried their best to enjoy the summer as they always had—in Siesta. But there, surrounded by his family and not hers, he'd begun to realize his mistake. Surrounded by people who loved and accepted her, yes, that was good, but there in a place with so many of her childhood memories—memories she'd shared with her family, not just him and his . . . it had been hard to watch Elizabeth suffer through it. If one weren't watching carefully it would have been difficult to tell, but *he* could tell. In those quiet moments when it had been just the two of them—no longer surrounded by the constant bubble of laughter and conversation, in the after-dinner lull when everyone was full and the air was cooling with the night, the fragrant smoke from dozens of fire pits hanging like a mist over the park and mingling with the sweeter floral scents of the flowers—then, her lonely burden had been painfully obvious.

"They didn't forget," Elizabeth said, bringing him back to the present. Nicholas wasn't sure what to say, so Elizabeth went on, "They had no intention of sending a card."

"Well . . ." Nicholas trailed off. "I'm not sure about that. Maybe they're just so busy that Christmas snuck up on them and by the time they thought to send a card it was too late? Or maybe they tried to call, and since you weren't there to answer, they gave up."

She hesitated, but then nodded. "That could be."

He gave her a big hug. "My dad said that he'd pay for us to call them tomorrow. I'll bet they'll say they tried to call and just couldn't get through. They know Mr. Nixon's number here."

Elizabeth nodded, her fears quelled for the moment. "You're right." She smiled, kissing him until he wore a matching one, as though smiles were catchy. At least for now, they were.

* * *

The following afternoon, after lunch, they went to Mr. Nixon's home, and from there placed a call to Elizabeth's parents' new home in Kitchener, Ontario—at Dr. Strauss's insistence and expense. The phone rang almost endlessly before someone finally answered. "Hello? Constance Smythe speaking."

Elizabeth wasn't surprised that her mother had reached the phone first. Somehow she always did.

"Mom! It's me."

"Elizabeth?"

"Yes mom! Merry Christmas!"

"But it's not Christmas. It's Boxing Day."

"Well, I know. I did send you all a Christmas card, but I wasn't sure if it had arrived, so we decided to call and wish you all more personally, even if we're a bit late."

"Oh, that's nice. Yes, we got your card."

Elizabeth smiled. Nicholas caught her eye and smiled back.

"Well, I haven't received yours yet. Maybe it got lost in the mail?"

"No, we didn't send you one. Did you have a nice Christmas?"

"Oh. You must have realized then that we're in Siesta with Nicholas's family," Elizabeth said, taken aback.

"You are? No I hadn't. That's nice, send them our regards."

Elizabeth frowned, trying to process her mother's light and flippant tone, the way she casually swept aside all her concerns.

"Yes, we had a nice time. How was your Christmas?"

"Busy—happy, filled with lot's of distractions for all of us."

"I can imagine. . . . Is Dad there? I'd like to wish him a belated Merry Christmas as well."

"No, your father isn't here, I'm afraid."

"Oh ... but it's Boxing Day. It's a day off for Dad and it's early in the morning," Elizabeth protested, clearly hearing her dad's voice as he inquired who the call was from in the background.

"Yes, well it's been nice chatting, Elizabeth, but I must go now. Still lots to unpack, lots to do. We're all going out together, later."

Elizabeth nodded slowly, resigned to her fate. "Yes, of course."

"Goodbye Elizabeth." With that came the dial tone and Elizabeth was left blinking at the telephone base where it was mounted on the wall. She stood there, still and quiet, trying to process the tone of the conversation. Abruptly, she felt hands on her shoulders, and she was startled at the touch. She turned to see Nicholas standing behind her. His expression was hard to read—angry, confused, sad? Maybe all three. He enfolded her in a hug and held her for a moment without speaking. She felt as though a fist were clenching tightly, painfully around her heart. Suddenly it was difficult to breathe, and she gently pulled out of Nicholas's embrace. Rather than let go of her, he held her at arm's length and watched her carefully, his green eyes searching, but her gaze was locked on some distant point and never met his. Her expression was slack and lifeless. She knew she must look like a horrified statue, but she couldn't break free of her thoughts just yet. She had to unravel what she'd just heard. There were no Christmas cards lost in the mail because none had been sent.

There'd been no phone call, because if they had tried to call, her mother wouldn't have been so surprised when she'd said they'd been in Siesta for the holidays. Yet she knew that much and the address of her apartment in Cape Town—but still her parents had made no attempts to contact her at all. Worse than that, her mother hadn't bothered to make excuses about these facts. She'd been very abrupt. Lizzie was acutely aware of her mother's cold shoulder. As if he'd read her thoughts, Nicholas said, "They're just busy, Elizabeth. They've just moved countries! Your mother only just arrived a week or so ago. They're not ignoring you. They're just very busy. I'm sure things will settle down later."

Elizabeth surprised herself when her voice came back steady and strong. "I know." But she didn't know that. She was saying it for his benefit, and for appearances, as if she somehow had to make excuses for her mother. She *hoped* busyness was all it was, but she knew it was more likely because her mother was still angry that she'd decided to stay with Nicholas in South Africa. Thanks to her mother's abiding ire over that, Elizabeth hadn't gone to the airport to say goodbye when she and Hattie had left for Canada, as she'd demanded. *But surely in time she'd get over it?* Yes, Elizabeth decided. Yes - *she needs more time.*

* * *

Time flew by. It seemed to Elizabeth that she'd barely had time to blink between Christmas and her birthday in late February. Now, the day after her birthday, she and Nicholas were sitting on the beach in Bloubergstrand, admiring Table Mountain across the bay. The giant, flat-topped mountain was colored a hazy blue by the distance, hence the name of the beach—*Bloubergstrand*, or Blue Mountain Beach.

A passing cloud completed its journey across the sun and suddenly Elizabeth felt herself basked in a bright, warm glow. She lay back on her towel and closed her eyes against the glare. She let the sun bake the salt water from her skin and idly dug her hands and feet beneath the hot, dry sand, only to uncover them again. She repeated the activity, letting the sand trickle warmly between her fingers and toes. It was somehow soothing.

Lying beside her, Nicholas was strangely quiet. They hadn't had much opportunity to celebrate her birthday the day of, so here they were to celebrate it now. She'd already received her present and card from him. The card had been witty and light—an attempt to take her mind off other, more serious things. The gift had been her favorite perfume, long-since too expensive for her to afford on a secretary's wages. It was sweet that he'd somehow remembered her favorite perfume. She felt sure she'd

only ever mentioned it in passing, maybe once. But no matter how sweet and thoughtful Nicholas had been to her of late, he couldn't make up for one glaring oversight. Her parents hadn't called. They hadn't written. As far as she could tell, they'd simply forgotten, but she suspected there was a much simpler explanation: they hadn't forgotten; they just hadn't cared enough to remember.

Elizabeth winced against the sun. Suddenly it felt like she was being suffocated beneath a hot, sun-colored blanket. She sat up with a gasp and realized she'd been holding her breath. Anxiety did that, she realized, with a racing heart. It upset all the body's normal rhythms until you had to remind yourself just to breathe. She blinked out at the sun-dappled ocean and tried to steady her breath with the rhythmic crashing and pounding of the waves.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Nicholas sitting up beside her. "What is it?" he asked, reaching out to squeeze her shoulder. She turned to eye his arm, willing it to move. He probably meant the gesture to be reassuring, but just then it felt like another unwelcome weight on her shoulders.

She forced a smile. "Just getting hot in the sun."

"Ah," he said, smiling back. "Let's go for another swim, then?"

She shook her head. "I'd rather go home. It's getting late, and we'll need to get cleaned up before you take me out for dinner."

She saw him hesitate, then nod. "Okay," he said, standing to shake the sand from his towel. She stood up and did the same.

Elizabeth could sense in the sudden, awkward silence between them that he wanted to say something or ask something, but he held himself in check with what seemed like a visible effort. They'd only been at the beach a little over an hour. It wasn't like her to grow tired of it so quickly, but she was overwhelmed by a sudden need to be alone. She couldn't share her problems with Nicholas. For one thing, he already knew. He'd done everything he could to be supportive, but there were only so many times one could offer comforting words before they began to sound trite. And then there was the other problem: in a roundabout kind of way, this was his fault. He was the only reason she'd stayed behind, alienating herself from her family in the process. If not for him, she'd be with them in Canada right now, celebrating her birthday as she always had. She couldn't blame him, of course, she knew that. They'd agreed to get married, and she couldn't leave her fiancé behind. Besides, if she'd wanted out of the engagement, she was free to leave at any time and join her family. It wasn't as though he were holding her hostage.

Elizabeth cast him a glance as they walked back to his car,

their sandaled-feet kicking through the hot sand. He seemed as distant and preoccupied as she. Had he somehow guessed at her thoughts? She looked away. A moment later she felt him grab hold of her hand. She was tempted to pull away, but by a force of will she sent him a smile instead.

She knew her resentful feelings toward him were a bad sign, and she felt guilty for having those feelings, but somehow she couldn't help it. Directly or indirectly, he was the reason she was cut off from her family right now. The distinction between intent and plain old causality was academic to her when the result was the same. Trade one Strauss for three Smythes. A silent scream tore through her thoughts. *Just a few more years . . .* she thought. It would get easier in time. It had to!

* * *

Nicholas sighed inwardly as they trudged up the beach. He felt like he could see the direction of Elizabeth's thoughts and read them as clearly as if she'd penned them in a diary, but he also felt powerless to do anything about it. How could he make her feel better? She felt like she was losing her family, like she'd already lost them, and she was grieving over that loss. Of course, it needn't have been like that, if not for her mother's determination to forget every special occasion she could. A portion of Nicholas's mental blame went out to Elizabeth's father, but somehow he knew that Edwin was an unwilling participant in these games. He was only her accomplice.

Just one letter or card—particularly now, for Elizabeth's birthday—would have eased the burden of their absence. A part of him hoped that their card was still in the mail, about to arrive any day now, but Nicholas knew better. He could see what Constance was doing, and why. She had no intention of easing her daughter's burden. She was hoping it would eventually become too much for Elizabeth and then she'd come running home. It was both manipulative and cold. He tried to cut Constance some slack by remembering that in her eyes, until recently, Elizabeth had been her little girl, and this sudden assertion of independence must have come as a shock. Nicholas pursed his lips into a firm line. *Well get used to it, lady.*

Knowing what the struggle was about didn't make it any easier for Nicholas to accept Constance's dirty tactics. He thought back to their chance encounter in the supermarket, and Constance's words: "*You know, Nicholas, this is all going to be very hard on Elizabeth. . . . If you really love her, you'll let her go.*"

Remembering those words sent a fresh burst of anger boiling through his brain, and Nicholas had to work hard to keep a lid on

it. This wasn't the time to criticize her mother and put himself in the middle. He snuck a glance at Elizabeth, but found her looking the other way. He wished she would share her thoughts with him. He could tell she was retreating, keeping more and more to herself. Her way of coping with it was to run, delay the pain long enough and maybe she wouldn't have to feel it, but he knew that would just make things harder in the end. She needed to deal with her emotions now, to find some way to accept the loss of her old life and start a new life with him. The faster she did that, the easier it would be for both of them.

But part of the problem was that they weren't even technically married yet. She was caught in some horrible limbo between her old family and her more recent commitment to him. If he put himself in her shoes, he could imagine that she must be feeling like a ship caught in a storm with no safe harbor in sight. But what could he do about it? He couldn't just marry her and be done with it. They were still waiting on her parents to arrange things—to finance the wedding as they'd promised. Nicholas snorted to himself. Right now they weren't even willing to pay postage, so Nicholas felt sure getting them to pay for a wedding was still a long way off.

The best they could do now, was to cope. But coping certainly wasn't easy! He found himself wishing Elizabeth would share her burdens with him. At the very least, he could sympathize. After all, he'd said goodbye to his own family at the age of eight. He knew all about the grieving process; it wasn't some grand mystery to him. He'd watched countless others arrive at St. Andrews and go through the same thing. There were those who sank beneath the weight of their grief—those were the runaways, and the shy, withdrawn kids who always seemed to be slouching and hanging their heads, as though at any moment they might decide to curl up in a fetal position and hide away from the world. Then there were those, like him, who'd eventually risen above the pain and accepted it. They'd adapted and were the stronger for it. The question was, would Elizabeth ultimately sink or swim?

He cast her another glance; this time his gaze lingered and he studied the anxious, faraway look in her eyes. She wasn't faring well, particularly now that her parents seemed determined to forget both Christmas *and* her birthday. Perhaps it would just take time for her. He recalled that some children had taken more time to adapt to boarding school than others, but eventually everyone had adapted. Even the runaways.

Yes, Nicholas decided, *she just needs time.*

Chapter 32

“Of course it's working!” Constance huffed, rubbing her hands together furiously.

“How do you know?” Edwin pressed.

“Because I do.” She said angrily, impatiently fiddling with the thermostat dial on the radiator. Edwin watched her from the couch with a frown and took a sip of his tea.

“It's up as high as it goes, dear.”

“I know that!” she snapped. Edwin watched her turn from the radiator and return to her place on the couch beside him to clamp her hands around a rapidly-cooling cup of tea. “One can't seem to get warm in this country.”

Edwin quirked an eyebrow at her. South Africa could also be cold in the winter—nothing close to minus temperatures, but the fact that all the buildings were heated in Canada and almost none were heated in South Africa made the difference between indoor temperatures slight. In fact Canada was probably the cozier country of the two countries in winter, as long as you stayed indoors. The only time one really noticed the difference was going outside—then the cold hit one like a bucket of ice, and little wonder: his lawn and driveway were full of the stuff. Right now they were enduring a cold snap in Kitchener, Ontario. Temperatures were hovering around minus twenty. The radiators weren't keeping up. It seemed their only recourse was to dress warm and drink copious amounts of tea. Edwin smirked at his wife who was hunched around her cup like it was a cauldron, as she tried to hide from the chilly air. He had warned her about the weather before they'd moved.

He glanced out the window. Fresh snowflakes were starting to pile around the windowsill. Edwin grimaced and looked away. He'd have to get up early tomorrow. Somehow it had never occurred to him that one might have to shovel the driveway before work. He had assumed the snow was a minor nuisance which cars dealt with by driving over and through. Not so, argued his Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme.

“She'll crack under the pressure eventually,” Constance said between sips of tea. “And then she'll come running back to us.”

Edwin shook his head, he looked worried. "I suppose she may crack, but I wonder whether we're doing the right thing."

Constance looked up at him abruptly. "Would you rather she stays in South Africa?" He frowned at his wife's hostile tone. "Would you rather that instead of being cut off from us for a few short months, she be cut off from us for years—decades? What do you think *she* would rather have happen?" Constance shook her head. "No, we're doing the right thing - the *kind* thing for her. It's tough-love Edwin and she needs it!"

"Perhaps—for everyone except Nicholas anyway."

"Now you're worried about the boy who started this mess? I wonder sometimes about you, Edwin, whether your loyalty is really only skin deep, or if it just befits you to be contrary. Focus on *our* family first. This is all Nicholas's fault, after all, why shouldn't he feel the consequences of his actions? Let him pay the price! He knew we were moving before he proposed to Elizabeth. Now we shall see who really commands her loyalty."

"If your plan succeeds, he's going to lose her. They'll split up. You would be responsible, and me your accomplice."

Constance's eyes narrowed. "Would you rather *we* lost her?"

"Of course not, but maybe there's a kinder, gentler way?"

"No! Either we lose her or he does, and I don't mean to lose."

Edwin sighed, running a hand through his thinning hair. "In that case I hope your plan works, fast, so that it all ends soon."

"Of course it'll work!"

Edwin nodded agreeably, though he wasn't entirely in agreement with his wife's tactics. He'd tried to call Elizabeth on her birthday, but his wife had caught him in mid-dial and thrown a fit. Since then she'd kept a strict watch on him, and made sure he understood the consequences of disobedience should he try to make contact from his office or a payphone? To her this was war, and traitors would be dealt with by the strictest means possible. His hypothetical punishments ranged all the way from him sleeping on the couch until the rapture, to divorce should his betrayal be grave enough. He didn't expect her to actually carry out those threats, but there was just enough stubborn steel behind her words to make him wonder, so he didn't dare try his luck. Sometimes his wife could be unreasonably stubborn, and unfortunately he *had* agreed to the "*for better or worse*" clause.

Edwin frowned as he drained his tea cup. "Well, it's an early start for me tomorrow, I'd better get some sleep."

Constance nodded, rising from the couch at the same time as him. "We'd both better." He started off toward the bedroom, but she laid a hand on his arm to stop him. "Don't forget, Edwin, I

was head girl at my school. I know how to keep *girls* in line. Sooner or later, being shunned by all of us, will push Elizabeth over the edge. She'll snap, then she'll come running home – broken. Then we can pick up the pieces. You'll see.”

Edwin smiled and nodded back. He hoped she was right. He wasn't sure how much more of this “*sending her to Coventry*” he could take. After all, it worked both ways. He hadn't heard from his daughter lately either.

* * *

Christmas, birthdays, Easter, Mother's day, Father's day—Elizabeth remembered them all, but she hadn't heard from her parents on any of the important days. They'd tried to call for her mother's birthday, Mother's day, her father's birthday, Father's day, but each time there'd been no answer. They'd sometimes tried to get through a day or two later, and then they'd succeed—Nicholas considered that to be because her parents couldn't afford to avoid phone calls for several days straight. But Constance always gave Lizzie the cold-shoulder.

They were deliberately staying out of touch, shunning Lizzie, keeping communications brief - to a minimum. Never once had they called or written to her, only ever the other way around. Letters went unanswered, ignored. When Lizzie complained, Constance pretended Lizzie was being melodramatic. Nicholas had never been more astounded in all his life. He couldn't believe how her parents were treating her. It was so cruel!

Nicholas considered the matter as he drove Elizabeth to the train station where she would catch the train to work. She took the train from Mowbray station to Cape-Town station, to work, every morning. Nicholas had taught her to drive in his car, but the train was cheaper and more convenient than a car, so he drove her to the station each morning, and each morning the silence between them grew. He made conversation, of course, but he was acutely aware of Elizabeth's unresponsiveness. He did everything he could to draw her out, but to little avail. He felt helpless, and each time he asked Elizabeth about it, she found some way to dismiss his concerns, as though he were imagining things. He knew better. He'd watched the carefree, bubbly, happy young woman he'd fallen in love with spiral down into a quiet, melancholy girl that he didn't recognize at all. She never smiled anymore, she had a blank disconnected look on her face, as if her spirit had left her body, and all that was left now, was something that looked like a mere-shell of her former self. He'd done his best to make up for her parents' ill-treatment by being the most supportive, agreeable, cheerful man he could be. He'd tried to lift

her spirits by being more attentive, by cracking jokes and teasing her, buying her flowers and chocolates, taking her on surprise dates, leaving romantic notes for her where she would find them later—anything to get a reaction out of her, but he was disappointed with the result.

Belatedly, Nicholas recognized the train station up ahead. He sighed and forced himself to abandon his unsettling train of thought. When he stopped the car, he turned to say goodbye, as he had every morning for the past six months—his arm draped over the back of her seat as he leaned in for a goodbye kiss—but Elizabeth wasn't looking at him; she was gathering her things. He waited patiently, but rather than turn to him, she turned to the door, opened it and stepped out of the car. He watched as she turned to him from outside the car and gave him a ghost of a smile. "Bye Nicholas ... and thank you."

He smiled back. "I'll see you tonight Lizzie, count on it."

But she made no reply. As he drove to class, Nicholas wore a heavy frown, as he thought. Things were going from bad to worse. He needed to do something fast. But what?

* * *

Elizabeth stepped out onto the train platform and went to take a seat on one of the benches and wait. This was her routine. The same thing every morning. Get up—early—go to the train station, wait at the station, ride the train, punch in, start work, work until she was mentally and psychologically exhausted, and then take the train back so that she could eat dinner with Nicholas, go to bed, and then do it all over again. For Elizabeth, the months had passed with the languor of the eternally damned—no where to go, no way to escape, nothing to hope for but that the days should pass more quickly.

She remembered spending all her days in school wishing for them to come to an end so that her life could begin, and now that it had begun, she found herself wishing for those carefree days as a school girl, when hope had soared anew each day, because the world had seemed so bright and full of possibilities. Now that she was living those possibilities, everything seemed so much grimmer. The life she'd dreamed of for herself had been married, with kids, a cozy home, and her family all around—everyone had always seemed to be smiling and laughing in those visions of the future, but now when she tried to imagine those things, she pictured herself standing alone by a dirty window, looking out at a gray world, and wondering where all the color and life had gone. Nicholas wasn't in any of those images—perhaps because his presence or absence could do nothing to affect her lonely future.

She felt her family's loss like a sharp pain whenever she tried to breathe. It was becoming worrisome, but then, if she were to die suddenly of a heart attack, it wouldn't be so horrible—it would be like sleep, only longer. Or maybe she'd end up in heaven, where all her troubles would be suddenly swept away and somehow cease to matter. *That would be nice. . . .*

Elizabeth heard the noise of the train coming in the distance, startling her out of her thoughts. Her head turned with disinterested slowness to see the train barreling down the tracks towards the station, its one giant headlight glinting through the gray swirl of fog. It was a dull, dreary morning. The fog had leached all the color and warmth from the world, just like she'd seen in her vision of the future. With only a quiet rustle of noise she stood up from the bench where she was seated and walked steadily, purposely towards the edge of the platform. As Elizabeth's feet brought her close to the yellow line, behind which it was safe to stand, she found her legs willing her on toward the edge, as if moving by their own accord, or as though someone or something were pushing her from behind. She frowned, puzzled by the effect, but she didn't arrest her momentum. She saw the train approaching out of the corner of her eye, and dead ahead lay the train tracks. They stood out like a sign marked "exit" in a dark room. Sleep. Trouble-free, worry-free, nothing but a blissful, peaceful end, or a new beginning. . . . How could that be bad? She closed her eyes, stopped thinking, and let her feet do the rest.



This is the only period photo left, of a clearly depressed Elizabeth (1978) Young couples are not able to recognize depression, or to know how best to deal with it. This was a terribly sad twist to an otherwise beautiful life and love story ... Nicholas never even saw it coming.

Chapter 33

Her feet crossed the line and she was a few short steps over it when she heard the train's horn blast out a warning. She wondered absently if that warning was for her? Then her right foot was stepping out into thin air and she felt her body pitch forward toward the tracks below. Suddenly, she felt hands on her shoulders, grabbing her firmly, pulling her safely back.

"Miss, are you all right?" the voice sounded strange in her ears, distant, like she was underwater. She turned to see a blurry face. She blinked to clear her eyes and felt something warm spilling down her cheeks. Now looking at the man who'd pulled her away from the tracks, she saw that he was elderly, missing a few teeth, his skin wrinkled, and black. That last detail caught her attention more than any other. At a time when Blacks killed Whites in schools, shopping centers, churches for what seemed like nothing more than the fun of it, one Black man had reached out and ...

The train rushed into the station behind her. Elizabeth felt the blast of wind on her back, but her rescuer held her fast, his dark eyes peering into hers. "Is everything fine, miss?" he asked again.

The side of the train was whirring by uncomfortably close so she took a step forward, cleared her throat, and nodded. "I'm . . . fine. Just . . . *tired*, I think."

He looked disbelievingly at her. The conductor blew his whistle, summoning them to board. "I don't know why a pretty young woman like you would be *tired of life*, but may God bless you anyway, Miss. Please take care of yourself. Somebody loves you and will miss terribly if you don't – you wouldn't want to do that to them, that would be terribly cruel. Please ... get some help."

With that, he turned and began walking away. Elizabeth found herself blinking after him, puzzled, wondering what had just happened. She watched the man climb into a separate passenger car reserved for Blacks, and then she realized she was going to miss her train if she didn't also climb aboard. She turned and stepped into line with the other passengers, feeling suddenly small and vulnerable, and like everyone's eyes were upon her. Who had seen her? A warm beam of sunlight broke through the

wraithlike fog, alighting on Elizabeth, just as she was the last person to climb aboard. If that man hadn't pulled her back, would she really have stepped out onto the tracks ? It felt like she had no choice . If she had, would she be at peace? She shuddered. Now it seemed like a very selfish thought . How would Nicholas feel? Her problems would be over , but how would he ever cope? Then she felt her Granny's ring on her finger, moving it around , remembering her granny's words : " Elizabeth , this old silver ring will one day be yours , and you must promise to look after it. Don't let anything happen to this ring! Make sure that you can pass it on to your first-born grand -daughter one day too , like I will to you . Everyone who 's ever worn this ring had happy marriages and families, not one divorce! You have a solemn duty as the next ring-bearer to find true love. When you do, hang on to it - even when times get really tough for you, as they inevitably seem to do."

Elizabeth shuddered, as she realized how all could have been lost and the family love-story and dream could have vanished in an instant. That sobered Elizabeth up. The gloom that had settled over her lifted enough that she now could at least think straight. What about her family in faraway Canada? She smirked at that thought as she wiped the few remaining tears from her cheeks. The way things were going, they might never know or even care if they heard. But as for Nicholas, "No!" she thought, "I couldn't do that to him ... ever!" But she knew, she needed help to cope. With that thought she moved to a nearby empty row of seating and began digging through her bag for her mirror, to fix her makeup.



Nicholas had realized something was wrong the instant he picked her up from the train station . Elizabeth wasn't just quiet and withdrawn , she was anxious and highly -strung ; her expression was fraught, her eyes wide and darting. She seemed on the verge of hysterics. Lizzie was just not acting normally.

"What's wrong?" Nicholas finally asked.

"What?" She turned to him and shook her head. "I don't—"

"Yes, you do," he said, his jaw set, his eyes fixed firmly ahead. He was acutely aware of her gazing at him with wide, unblinking

blue eyes, almost glazed-over - in a trance. "Come on, out with it."

Maybe it was the same thing that had been bothering her all along, but he needed to know. He'd grown tired of playing the ever-patient, understanding role. Either she was going to rely on him for support or she wasn't, but he wasn't going to make it easier for her to be alone in her anguish any longer.

"Out with what?"

"Everything! Something! Why are you so morose Lizzie?"

Elizabeth crossed her arms over her chest and looked away.

Nicholas frowned. He waited a few seconds, then asked, "So?"

"I'm not going to respond to that tone."

"What tone? I'm not using any special tone."

"Yes, you are, and you just did."

Nicholas took a deep breath. "Elizabeth, I'm not stupid."

"Nobody said you were."

"No, maybe not, but you're acting as though I am. I can see how all of this is affecting you, but you're pretending like you're invulnerable, like it doesn't hurt anymore, and that's not true."

Nicholas spared a second from watching the road to look at her. She was stolid, her lips sealed, so he went on, "You're not alone, Elizabeth! *I'm* here. *I* love you. *I'm* not going to ignore you and pretend like you're dead or gone forever from my side."

He noticed out of the corner of his eye, something cracked in her veneer, and for a second he was afraid she was about to burst into tears, but then she set her jaw and shook her head and her emotions were firmly under her control again.

Nicholas grimaced. *Fine, I'll just have to push harder.* "The way you're acting, I'm beginning to wonder if you even want to marry me. Frankly, I don't think you're ready for it. If you're going to be like this, if being with me is going to make you so unhappy, then, tough as it is for me to face that reality, maybe we shouldn't get married. Maybe I'm not the right one for you?"

Elizabeth turned to him then, looking hurt, betrayed, and angry all at once. "You . . . you . . ."

"Me?" he asked in a sarcastic voice. "What about me? Come on, out with it, go ahead, say it - say what's on your mind!"

"You're horrible!"

Nicholas winced. "Horrible, oh, thank you. Is that all?" He turned to look at her, saw the crumpling look in her eyes. All he wanted was to reach out and comfort her, but he couldn't—not yet. She was holding everything in, pushing it all too deep for him to help; he needed to force her emotions to the surface or she was going to drown without even being able to scream for help, and if she did, he may not even be there to hear her.

"This is all your fault! If it weren't for you, none of this would have happened! I'd still know that my dad cared about me."

That stopped him cold; suddenly his sarcastic smirk and the fires of neglect grew cold. All the words he'd had in mind to say, the goads and jibes to bring her out of her shell died voiceless as his heart grew cold. A sullen ache rose as a giant lump in his throat, as he realized that Constance had won.

"My fault?" he echoed softly. He began nodding, swallowed thickly, focusing on driving them back to the apartment building.

Elizabeth wasn't in any state to explain her accusations; she'd turned her head away, and she was crying. He felt bad, *horrible* even—just as she'd said he was—but there was another horrible feeling rising to the fore of his thoughts, and he was disappointed to find that it was self pity. There was something soul-destroying about having done and given everything to help someone, only to have those very efforts thrown in one's face.

He wanted to say something to her, to ask what she meant about it being his fault, or just to apologize for pushing her too far, but now he couldn't find the words. He'd gotten his wish; he'd forced everything out into the open, but he hadn't quite expected what he'd found. Elizabeth wasn't blaming her parents—her *mother*, who so richly deserved the blame. She was blaming him, like somehow he was the bad guy standing between her and her dad. It wasn't fair. After all he'd done to please her parents and her—even to the point of making them a life-altering deal, which was now looming over him—she didn't seem the least bit grateful. He was going to give up his family, his country, his friends—*everything*—for Elizabeth, but she couldn't see clearly anymore. All she knew was that her family was rejecting her, worse yet, her dad. Nicholas was the reason she had to stay, and the reason her mother had taken such umbrage and started this war.

Then he remembered Constance's words to him, and he felt them go through his heart like a sharp spike: "*If you really love her, you'll let her go.*" Nicholas shook his head slowly. *You were right. I can't believe it, but you were right. You win, we lose.*

* * *

Elizabeth fled the car before Nicholas had even finished parking it. She left the door open, with him calling after her, but she didn't hear his words or even care to know what he'd said. She ran to the elevators. The doors were closing with her inside just as Nicholas came racing into the lobby. She half expected him to catch up with her a few minutes later and come knocking at the door of her apartment, but she lay collapsed and crying on her bed for what seemed like hours without a solitary sound to

interrupt her misery. She cried until she was spent and there were no tears left. At last she sat up and stared expectantly at the door. He hadn't come for her. He wasn't coming. She'd lost him, too. She should have thrown herself in front of the train, she thought. Nicholas was hardly a reason to keep on going. It seemed like even he wouldn't miss her. The way he'd been going on in the car, he sounded like he wanted out. *"If you're going to be like this, maybe we shouldn't get married."* Those words from a man who supposedly loved her. No, he wanted out. He just wanted her to say it so he wouldn't have to. *That's how he does things*, she realized; *keeps his own hands clean and gets others to do his dirty work, so no one can accuse him of doing any wrong.*

That's the man she was going to marry? For whom she'd given up everything? She shook her head. No. She lay back on her bed with a sigh, blinking the blurry remnants of tears from her eyes. As she was drifting off to sleep and sweet oblivion, the knock on her door that she'd been expecting finally came. First one knock, then two, then three in a sequence, followed by a voice.

"Elizabeth?" The voice waited, and she held her breath. "Can I come in?" She shook her head, and bit her tongue. "Elizabeth?" She waited for him to go away. When he didn't try again, she realized she'd got her wish, and somehow that made her feel worse than ever. A scream rose up in her throat and she rolled over to stifle it in her pillow. She punched the bed until she felt a sharp pain in her wrist, and then she subsided, breathing heavily. Soon, she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep, and mercifully all the pain disappeared—if only for a little while.

* * *

Nicholas stood at the door and knocked. He was still feeling horrible, but he'd overcome his storm of self-pity long enough to come to a conclusion. He knew what he had to do, and he knew why. It was time to apologize, and then to explain, very carefully, what he had in mind to Elizabeth. He realized with a dull ache that this would probably be the end, but they'd done it before, so maybe, just maybe, they could do it again. "Elizabeth?" he asked.

But there was no reply. Only silence. After a while of standing there, feeling foolish, he decided that she wasn't going to answer, so he left. He walked down the hall, up the stairs, to Denise and Sandra's apartment. Just now, he couldn't stand to be alone.

Inside their apartment he explained his sad story around the wobbly table in their little kitchen over steaming cups of Rooibos tea. He explained how Elizabeth had finally snapped out of it, just long enough to reveal that she secretly blamed him for everything.

Denise sat opposite him, aghast, her mouth hanging open and

her green eyes wide. Sandra frowned and bent down to replace the doubled up napkin which propped up the wobbly table. Once she'd restored stability to the table, she slid the plate of Lemon-Creams over to him. "Have a cookie. You look like you need it."

Nicholas smiled ruefully and plucked a cookie from the plate. "What am I going to do?"

"Well . . ." Denise began, but trailed off with a sudden frown.

"The thing is, I know what I have to do." He shrugged. "I've already made up my mind, but it's so terrible to contemplate."

"And what's that?" Sandra asked.

Nicholas opened his mouth to say it, but Denise cut him off: "You're going to let her go, aren't you? Back to Canada."

That brought silence from all three of them, and Nicholas took advantage of the moment to eat his cookie.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Sandra asked. "If you do, there's a very good chance that you'll never see her again."

Nicholas winced. "I don't have a choice. She's left me with no other option. If she's blaming me, things are going to get much worse, and quickly. Our relationship might survive another separation, but it can't survive a slow death in the fires of resentment. I was provoking her in the car on the way back from the station, trying to get her to lash out and snap her out of it, but if I'm honest with myself, a lot of that probably came from my own resentment for the way she's been treating me. I've begun looking at other couples with envy, wondering if behind all those happy smiles and laughing eyes they have their own problems, and are they bigger or smaller than ours?"

Sandra smiled wanly. "I know what that feels like."

"Then you know why I have to let her go. Not just for her sake, but for mine, too. I cannot watch her spirit die before my eyes."

"Yes, but . . . do you really think the two of you can stand a separation right now? I mean, she's not thinking right."

"I don't know." Nicholas replied.

Denise sighed and reached across the table for his hand. Their eyes met, and a spark of mutual understanding seemed to leap between them, raising every hair on his arm, sending a shiver down his spine. "Whatever happens I'm here for you."

He felt Sandra's hand on his shoulder. "*We're* here for you."

Nicholas forced a smile. "Thank you - Both of you! I appreciate this more than you know. I need your help. This is not going to be easy for Elizabeth, or me. I'm not sure how women think or feel about these things. Please help me, so I don't mess everything up! I'm really worried about Lizzie ... I've never seen her like this."

"We will!" they both said, smiling, and he knew they would.

Chapter 34

The one thing she had forgotten in her isolation, in the warmth and security of her bed, was the alarm clock, which now roused her from her sleep. She turned it off and sat up, her feet dangling over the edge of the bed. She sat blinking at the time. 6:00 am. She was dimly aware of a deep physical and emotional need for more sleep, but a nagging responsibility tugged at her. She had to go to work. Nicholas would be by in half an hour to take her to the train station . . . If he wasn't still mad at her.

She stood up reluctantly from the bed and shuffled over to the bathroom. She was halfway through her morning routine, now brushing her teeth in the mirror, when she finally remembered everything that had happened yesterday. That delayed memory surprised her, and suddenly she felt the world caving in on her again. She stopped, studying her reflection instead. She'd been so distraught that she hadn't even removed her makeup last night. There were still some vague remnants of it even after her shower.

She finished brushing her teeth and worked to carefully removed her makeup and then she replaced it with a fresh layer. All the while her brain was turning over the events of yesterday. It seemed somehow like a dream, like it couldn't be real. There came a point when horrible things defied even themselves; after which there was only numbness, which she could feel creeping through her again. The temptation to disassociate from it all was strong, and it was easy to pretend like none of it had really happened to her. *Her* parents weren't ignoring her. They loved her. *She* hadn't really been planning to step in front of the train. She would have stopped herself at the last minute. Nicholas didn't want to break off the engagement. He was in love with her. He loved her. He . . . She heard a knock on the door.

Then a muffled voice called out her name. "Elizabeth?"

Nicholas was there. That was at once reassuring and terrifying. Suddenly her flimsy constructs flew apart and she felt an intense flash of dread. If she opened that door, she'd have to face him, and if she faced him, she'd be confronted with the truth. The truth that she'd given up everything for a man who was getting

cold feet. Now nobody loved her. She had gambled and lost it all.

"I'll . . ." She started, but struggled to speak. "I'll be right out."

"Okay," the voice replied.

Elizabeth stared in the mirror again, examining her makeup. She felt a sudden urge to scream, then cry, then to scream again, but instead she tried thinking about something else. Whatever happened, she wouldn't cry in front of Nicholas. She would force herself to hold it together long enough to get to the train station. Yesterday was the dress rehearsal. It was time to finish it, now. **

* * *

Nicholas went over and over what he was going to say in his mind, silently rehearsing to himself. Would he tell her now, before they left, or in the car? Either way she would have some time to think about it while she was at work, but now would be better, that way he would have time and attention to spare to gauge her reaction. When the door opened, he almost fell into her apartment. He'd been leaning on it. He recovered his balance just in time to see Elizabeth already speeding down the hall ahead him. He frowned, closed the door behind him, and caught up to her at the elevators. She was avoiding his gaze. He stepped in front of her, but she looked away.

"Elizabeth, about yesterday . . . I'm sorry. I really am! I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't mean to be so . . . *horrible*, but you have to admit, there's some truth to what I said. You've been so distant, so locked away in your own world, and you won't even let me in to help you. I had to make you open up to me."

Elizabeth turned to look at him then, her head cocked and eyebrows raised. She looked confused. "Nicholas . . ." She took a deep breath and then went on. "If you want to break off the engagement, then just say so. You don't have to circle around it, pretending it's what *I* want. You can go ahead and tell me."

Nicholas shook his head quickly. "What? Elizabeth—" The elevator doors opened behind him and he reluctantly turned to step inside. She followed him in and went to stand on the opposite side of the elevator from him with arms crossed over her chest. He punched the button for the lobby and turned to her. "That's *not* what this is about."

"No? Because you seemed pretty clear yesterday. 'Maybe we shouldn't get married.' That's what you said."

Nicholas gritted his teeth, covering the distance between them

**

In real-life, this story nearly ended here. Were it not for an unknown old man's vigilance, caring and swift actions, I would never have been born. Parents can break the will of children with unrelenting, cruel harshness instead of patient, loving kindness.

in a few short steps. "Because *you* seemed so uncommitted to making things work. Elizabeth, however we decide to face life's challenges, if we're going to be married, we'd better decide to face them together, or else what's the point? How can we be together and yet stand so far apart?" He reached up to stroke her cheek, and let his eyes bore into hers, willing her to understand. Something flickered in the stubborn set of her lips, and the hardness around her eyes. Her eyes widened with understanding, and her lips began to tremble, but then she looked away. That moment of vulnerability was all he needed. Nicholas gently turned her head back to him, then he kissed her. He poured all his anger and frustration into passion and soon found her doing the same. They were so overcome by the moment that when the elevator stopped - then started, they didn't notice and they didn't care. Everything that mattered to them was right there. Time was just an inconvenience, dancing around the edges of their embrace.

Finally someone cleared their throat, and Nicholas became aware of another person in the elevator with them. Suddenly abashed, they broke apart and stood quietly to one side of the elderly lady who was riding the elevator down with them. When the elevator reached the lobby once more, they let her exit first, and then followed her lead at a discreet distance. As they crossed the lobby, Nicholas reached for Elizabeth's hand, and she didn't pull away. She squeezed his hand so tightly that he thought he would lose feeling in his fingers.

They walked like that all the way to his car until Nicholas stopped at the passenger's side and opened the door to let her in. Once they were both seated inside the car, Nicholas turned to her rather than turn the key in the ignition. "Elizabeth—" She met his gaze, and he noticed now that her eyes were gleaming with a sheen of unshed tears. He winced to see that. Seeing her sorrow somehow made his all the more intense, and the specter of what he was about to say suddenly loomed large and terrifying before him. The words caught in his throat. "I—" He didn't want to let her go. He couldn't. Maybe it wasn't really necessary. Maybe—

She shook her head. "You don't need to apologize anymore, Nicholas. It's not all your fault. You were right. Yesterday something was wrong. I . . ." She took a deep breath. "When you dropped me at the train station, as the train was coming in . . ." She paused to gather herself, but instead she lost her composure, and looked away, the tears suddenly spilling down her cheeks.

He reached out to wipe them away. "Hey, it's okay, what is it?"

She shook her head. "You're right. You've been right all along. I can't take it anymore, Nicholas. . . . I didn't realize just how bad

things were until I almost stepped in front of that train.”

Nicholas’s eyes flew wide open, and he blinked in disbelief. His mouth was open as if to sharply object, but his expression collapsed in silent horror and in lieu of words he crushed her into a fierce hug. “No, Elizabeth!” He shook his head, and suddenly he knew that he really didn’t have a choice. “Never! You can’t do that! You have so much to live for! Your family might be acting like they don’t care, but they do. And besides that, forget them, if you were dead, I may as well be, too. I’d never get over you, Lizzie, I’d never forget you – I’d have to die of a broken heart too, there’d be no other choice for me! There’s always a way out Lizzie!” Elizabeth was crying softly against his shoulder. He let her expend herself before withdrawing to hold her by her shoulders at arms length. “There’s always a way out,” he repeated. “In fact, I do know how to fix everything.”

Lizzie gave him a broken smile. “You can’t fix it. No one can.”

“Maybe not. Not perfectly, but if we keep going this way, we’re not going to make it – and it will all have been for nothing.”

Elizabeth eyebrows arched sharply downward and she shook her head. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you missing family so terribly. It hasn’t even been a year yet. Imagine another two years of this. If it doesn’t kill you, it’ll kill *us*. It nearly did both those things! If we’re already blaming each other, how much worse will it be by then? I’m afraid there might not be anything left to save at that point.”

“I don’t . . . what are you saying, Nicholas?” She asked.

“I’m saying, you need to go to Canada, now. Be with your family. I’ll finish up here and follow as soon as I can. Then I’ll apply to immigrate and we’ll get married in Canada.”

Elizabeth looked suddenly torn, her face stricken. “You mean we’ll be apart for all that time?”

“We’ve done it before Lizzie – while I was in the air force. It was the same thing— only 18 months. I’m sure we can do it again.”

“And if we can’t?”

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Then maybe we’re not destined to be together after all? I mean, I’ve left you to decide on the date for our wedding, Lizzie. Remember? I meant it Lizzie! If that day’s tomorrow, I’ll be there with you. If it’s two years from now, I’ll be there too. If it’s never – then that’s your choice too, and I’ll somehow have to find a way to live with that sad reality – but I will never, ever, make that choice for us Lizzie – I simply cannot, I don’t want to! I just love you too much for that, Lizzie!”

“*Destined . . .*” Elizabeth repeated. She seemed to think it over for a long moment. “I think we are.” She reached out for his hand

and squeezed it tight. "No ... I *know* we are!"

He nodded, smiling, relieved. "Then we don't have anything to worry about." But he wasn't so sure. A lot could happen in 18 months, and the only reason they'd "lasted" the last time was that they hadn't been together. She'd been dating Charles in that time. He was just lucky that his exit from the air force had coincided with a serious fight between her and Charles.

"Tomorrow we'll call your parents and let them know that you're going to join them in Canada, earlier than anticipated."

Elizabeth still looked torn. "What if . . ."

He shook his head. "It's the only way, Elizabeth."

Her face crumbled. "I don't want to be apart from *you* either!"

Nicholas pulled her back into his arms and buried his face in her hair. "It'll be okay," he whispered into her ear. He felt her shaking her head against his. "Shhh. If there is any way at all for us, to be together, I promise you, we'll find it!"

She pulled away from him, the tears glistening wetly on her cheeks. "You shouldn't make promises you can't keep."

"I don't. I've always kept my promises to you Lizzie! I love you!"

* * *

Constance had the phone pressed to her ear, a broad grin on her face. "Oh, dear, are you sure that's what you want to do?"

"Yes, Nicholas and I have discussed it. He'll be working so hard in these next two years that he'll barely have time to see me anyway. I'll just impede his studies by being around him."

"Well, that is true. I've always known he was a smart boy."

"So, you'll pay for my airfare?"

"Of course, dear. It will be wonderful to have you home again! You'll see. The time will fly by! And well, you never know how life surprises you while you're wait here."

"What do you mean by that?"

"There's always a better plan Elizabeth. Sometimes we just need to open our eyes to fully see it. Oh, and Canada is such a lovely country! You'll see, my girl. You'll see. I'm always right!"

"I suppose so. . . ."

Constance was nodding vigorously, grinning wildly. *Her plan had worked!* She set the phone down, unable to contain herself, she was jittery with excitement, her thoughts were jumping in a thousand different directions at once. She forced herself to focus. She had things to do. She needed to place a long-distance call to an old friend . . . urgently! She smiled. Nicholas had finally taken her advice—not that she'd given him much choice, mind you. She smirked. Now was the time to take advantage of his submission. Yes, he'd regret having crossed her. Everyone did, sooner or later.

Chapter 35

Nicholas was driving, on his way to the airport to see Elizabeth off. He felt a hollow ache in his chest that made it hard to breathe. He had to remind himself this wasn't goodbye. It never was. It couldn't be. He knew better than to give in to despair when so many times before it had looked hopeless for them and their love had made it back from the brink. No, he refused to give in to despair. This wasn't the end. He shot Elizabeth a quick glance and felt reassured to see she wasn't faring much better. Her eyes were dry, but when he'd gone to her apartment to pick her up and help her move the last of her things into his apartment for storage, he'd noted that her eyes were red from crying. He didn't want her to be sad. He wanted to tell her there was no reason to cry, that it would be okay, to see her smile again, but it made him feel better knowing that he wasn't the only one who felt his heart was being torn apart.

They reached the airport ahead of schedule. Nicholas felt his heart hammering erratically in his chest. Panic struck. He was a fool! He should turn back now before it was too late—drive as far and fast as he could, with Lizzie, in the opposite direction.

Instead, he turned the key and the car's idling rumble was cut off with a loud silence. He turned to Elizabeth. She was already looking at him, her face a mirror of his—pale and stricken, her eyes wide and glazed over as if in horror or a daze.

"Well?" he said. "We're here."

She nodded slowly. "Yes. We are."

They sat there a moment longer just staring at one another, neither one wanting to open the door and get out of the safety of the car. At last, Nicholas sighed and climbed out. He went around to Elizabeth's door and opened it for her. She was still sitting statuesque in the passenger's seat.

"Come on, Lizzie, you don't want to miss your flight."

She flashed him a ghost of a smile and said, "Maybe I do." She sighed, climbing out. He closed the door behind her and fetched her luggage from the trunk. One suitcase and a carry-on bag. She took the bag while he took the suitcase. As they walked toward

the airport, he took her free hand in his. Noticing it was cold, but sweaty, as if she were in a state of shock, he gave her hand a gentle squeeze which she acknowledged with a weak smile.

It was bustle of activity inside, and for a moment they stood just inside the doors, gazing this way and that, trying to discern the direction they should go. Nicholas found a sign pointing the way and started in that direction. He accompanied her through the process of checking her luggage and getting her boarding pass. From there they went to the waiting area before the departure lounge and sat down together. They had half an hour before the airplane was to start boarding. Suddenly, Elizabeth all but collapsed against him. He took her in his arms and kissed the top of her head, taking a moment to inhale the scent of her hair—it smelled like peaches—and the soft scent of her perfume. He wanted to commit every detail of her to memory before circumstances beyond their control tore her from him, once again. If they were destined to be together, destiny sure had a lot of fun toying with them. Nicholas marveled at how small and fragile Elizabeth felt in his arms. Sometimes she seemed like such a strong woman, but lately when he held her, she felt like a child, still and small in his arms.

“I don't ever want to leave this bench,” Elizabeth whispered in his ear. “I want to sit here with you forever, Nicholas.”

“I'd rather you not leave, Lizzie. . . . but you have to.”

“Why did I let you convince me that this was for the best?”

Nicholas sighed. “Because it is Lizzie. Because when you're far away from me, in Canada, I'll never do to you what your mother is doing and has done. I'll never make you choose. This way around, just maybe you'll get to keep everyone you love. Unlike your mother, when you're far away from me in Canada, I won't shun you. I'll still be writing you love letters and calling you from South Africa whenever I can afford it, but if you stay here with me, your mother is going to continue ignoring your letters and screening your calls. She's not going to give up until she gets her way - so for now at least, we have to give her what she wants, else you will crack again, under her cruel, relentless pressure, then, as she's planned, you'll blame me, or yourself, again – not her.” He replied.

Elizabeth grew still and quiet once more. Her gaze grew dim and drifted far away, as though a faint, flickering light switched off inside her head. Eventually she nodded her agreement, as if she had only now heard what he'd said. “You're right Nicholas,” she said slowly, then added “But it's not fair. I really hate this!”

Nicholas took her face in his hands and forced her to look him in the eye. “Yes, it's not fair, but what can we do? We can't

change your mother. We can't make her see things the way we both want her to. There'll come a day, I promise you, when she won't have any power over us, but until then, let's be smart!"

Elizabeth sighed and something inside her seemed to crumble. She collapsed against him, hugging him tightly. "Thank you, Nicholas. Thank you for being so understanding ... so giving."

"You're welcome, Lizzie."

Silent now, they passed the last few minutes together, sitting and holding on to each other, both outwardly stalwart, but with a sense of mounting dread in their hearts. Nicholas wondered if Elizabeth could hear his frantically pounding heart—as though it were screaming to be heard above the din inside the waiting area. Then the call for boarding of her flight started, but Lizzie held on. "The plane's boarding," he whispered in her ear resigned, sighing. "Let them board first, we still have some time," Lizzie replied. "Yes," he said, "a few minutes, then memories are all that's left."

* * *

She could literally feel her heart breaking. The only thing that was keeping her together was holding on to him. She felt like her whole world had collapsed again and he was the only thing left standing. Suddenly, it didn't matter that her family was willing to take her back and actually *speak* to her again. All that mattered was the trade she was making to have them back in her life. Either she would be with her family ... or with Nicholas. She couldn't have them all at the same time. Nicholas had just said that this way she could have them all, but it wasn't true! Either way she was making a choice. Maybe she wouldn't lose Nicholas by going to Canada, now, but she was certainly taking that risk. It shouldn't have been that way, and right now she couldn't understand why it was. Why was her mother insisting it be this way, her way? They needed another miracle. They needed divine intervention. Lizzie didn't consider herself a very religious person, but lately, circumstances beyond her control were fast making her one! It seemed like every time she stopped to breathe, she could feel her world spinning out of control. It was too much for her to take. Just this morning she had prayed, pleading with God to help her and Nicholas, to intervene, yet again, on their behalf.

The call for boarding came again, but she had no intention of letting Nicholas go. He softly whispered in her ear to tell her, but she brushed his concerns away. It wasn't time yet. She'd stay with him until the very last moment – till they'd all boarded.

When that moment finally came, she pulled away with great reluctance, her eyes fixed firmly on his. He stood and offered his hand to help her up. She took it and picked up her carry-on in

her other hand. Standing there in front of him, with no time left to think of what to say, she didn't know how best to say it. *See you in a year and a half! Or maybe two? ...* She shook her head. "Nicholas ..."

"Shhh." He pressed a finger to her lips, and then pulled her close and kissed her, removing the need for any less significant goodbye. She wanted that moment to last forever. When at last they parted, Nicholas said, "Don't worry. The time will fly by."

"That's what my mother said ..."

Nicholas frowned. "Well, maybe I'll even be able to visit you once or twice before I finish my degree."

Elizabeth's eyes lit up at the suggestion. "Really? What about Christmas? You could visit us over Christmas! If you don't, then your wish at our waterfall last Christmas-eve will fail. Remember? You wished that we never spend Christmas apart!"

Nicholas hesitated. "Do you think your mother will allow it?"

"She'll have no choice." Lizzie reached into her bag and pulled out her ticket. "Nicholas, remember, I bought a 45-day APEX excursion return ticket, it was the cheapest. I'll tell my mother when I arrive that it's my one condition. She has to allow you to visit whenever you can, or else I'll go back using this very ticket!" Nicholas was surprised by a sudden spark of fight he now saw twinkling in Elizabeth's eyes - suddenly he smiled, and his heart leaped with hope as he realized that they had a possible reprieve.

"Today's the 6th of October, Lizzie. Forty-five days won't last until Christmas. Do you think she'll honor any such bargain?"

Elizabeth set her jaw and nodded. "She'd better, Nicholas!"

"Well, I'll do everything I can to visit over Christmas. We met at Christmas, and we've only ever spent one Christmas apart. Maybe we can hold the line at only that one lonely Christmas, always. I don't want my Christmas wish to fail - ever!" adding "or yours!"

She smiled. "I know you'll find a way Nicholas - you always do!"

"Don't forget to call me when you're near a phone again, when you get to your parents' home in Kitchener ... ok?"

"I'll try, shortly after I land in Canada," she promised. She would be out of touch with him for two days while she was traveling, going via London and then only to Canada. She flashed him a wan smile, squeezed his hand one last time, then turned to shuffle into the line behind the few people going through security. Security then consisted of a solitary officer checking everyone's boarding passes. When Elizabeth was almost to the front of the line, she turned to see if he was still there. He hadn't moved an inch. He waved, and she blew him a kiss. He smiled and caught that kiss, placing it over his heart, then blew her a final kiss too.

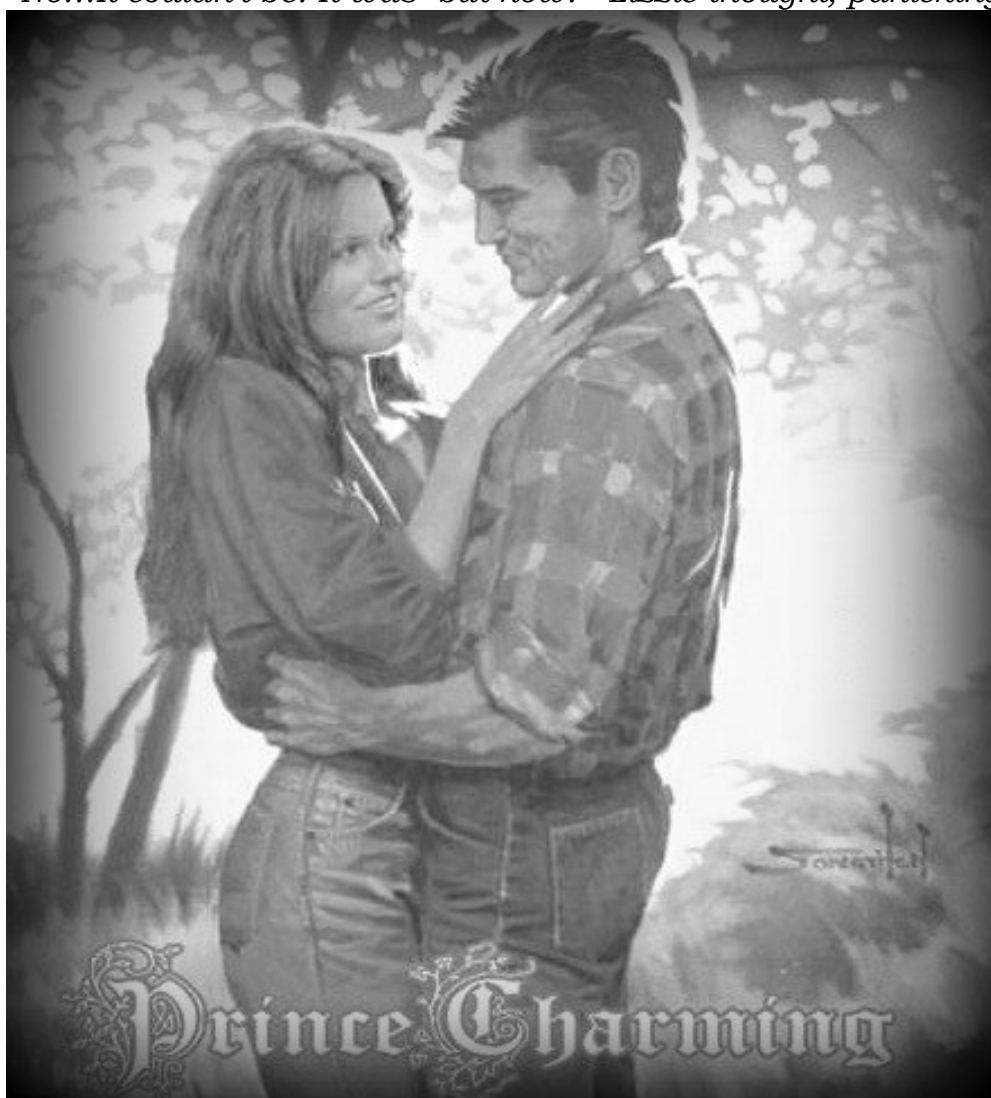
He called out to her, "I'll wave to you from the balcony upstairs! Watch for me there as you walk over to the plane!"

"Okay!" She smiled as she watched him leave, and then the one person in line behind her pointed meaningfully to the security guard she'd left waiting. It was her turn to pass through security. She began handing her boarding pass to the officer—

And then someone on the far side of security, already in the departure lounge and in line to board the plane, waved to her and loudly called out her name: "Elizabeth!"

Stunned, Elizabeth saw who it was, and then the officer handed her boarding pass back to her, and the person in line behind her none-too-gently nudged her out of the way. She stood there to one side of the security checkpoint, dumbstruck and blinking stupidly at the man who was now grinning and waving to her from the line to board the aircraft.

"No...It couldn't be! It was -but how?" Lizzie thought, panicking.



Chapter 36

Nicholas had watched Elizabeth blow him a kiss. He'd felt a heart-wrenching sadness, but also a distant kind of hope. He carried that hope with him up the staircase to the second floor balcony where he could watch Elizabeth's plane depart. He would also get to see her again, one last time, as she walked out beneath the balcony, crossing the tarmac to the waiting plane. "The way they'd said goodbye - it wasn't really goodbye," Nicholas thought as he stepped outside into a warm breeze and found a place to lean against the railing. There was no way he could doubt that they would end up together again one day, that they'd again overcome this time of separation. It might not be destiny holding them together, but it always felt as if it were something far stronger. The connection they had couldn't be severed with mere distance or time - that had never succeeded. But this time the distances were huge and the time may prove to be short - or very long! Then he banished his fear and thought "There was no magic number of miles or days that can separate us - which would suddenly become too many, preventing us from seeing each other again! I'll cross any distance to be with her, however great that was! I will find a way to be with her again ... forever!"

He wasn't left waiting there longer than a few minutes before Elizabeth came walking outside. He began smiling—

And then he realized that she wasn't alone, and all his new-found hope took a sudden nosedive into the abyss. Suddenly his heart was pounding, his palms were sweating, his fists were bunched-up, and he had to force himself not to leap over the railing after her. It was too noisy for him to call out to them. And besides, what would he say? His expression grew grim, his eyes went wide with hurt and confusion. Was this mere coincidence? But how could it be? Surely the odds for it being so, were too slim. He watched with mounting fury and dread as Elizabeth and Charles crossed the tarmac together. This couldn't be happening. It wasn't happening. He refused to believe it. As they reached the staircase to the 747 and began walking up together toward the cabin door, it began to really sink in. He'd been set up! Elizabeth

and her mother had to have known that Charles would be on this same flight. Was Charles also going to Canada? Would they be back together and dating in just a few months? Even a few days? Had this been the plan all along? But surely Elizabeth couldn't be that cold and calculating - that fickle. Nicholas shook his head. Maybe this was some sick kind of justice. He'd stolen Elizabeth from Charles when she'd been engaged to him, and now Charles was about to do the same to him. No, he corrected himself, that wasn't true! Elizabeth hadn't been engaged to Charles anymore when they'd been reunited alongside the beach in the Wilderness.

But what did any of that matter? Nicholas shook his head. His confusion and heartache were mounting with every passing second. When Charles and Elizabeth reached the top of the ramp, Elizabeth stopped and turned—almost absently. She appeared to be searching for a moment, then her gaze locked with his and she waved. In that moment Charles turned, too. He wrapped his arm around Elizabeth's shoulders and waved alongside her. Confused, stunned, angry, defeated, Nicholas waved mechanically back at them. He felt like they were mocking him. He watched Charles gently guiding her inside the plane with a hand at the small of her back, and Nicholas felt an overwhelming urge to break Charles's nose. Then Elizabeth and Charles were gone from sight. Nicholas was left alone, his thoughts raging. A silent scream tore through his mind, followed by silence ... followed by a still small hope—

Maybe it was just a coincidence? It had to be a coincidence!

Nicholas turned to walk away. Waiting to see the plane take off didn't seem appealing anymore. Now he had to keep himself from running - purposely slowing down to control himself. He wanted to get as far away from this agonizing scene as quickly as possible!

* * *

Elizabeth still couldn't believe it! She followed Charles through the aircraft, shuffling down the aisle, searching for her seat. She was eager to get some distance from him. When they'd met in the departure lounge, he'd explained he was on his way back to London and that, "By chance, we just happened to have the same flight - what are the odds, hey?" adding "*It's fate!*" *he'd said to her.*

"If it was fate, then fate was playing a cruel game!" she thought

"Elizabeth," he said now, casting a glance over his shoulder to see if he had her attention.

She raised her eyebrows in question, but gave no audible response. The less she said to him the better. A year had passed since her heart had been his, but he still had an effect on her. To the same degree that he had once attracted her to him, he now repelled her. She was urgently, desperately anxious for them to

part ways once more. A chance encounter, perhaps, but his chances with her were thoroughly spent. There was no avenue left open to him, no door to her heart for which he still held the key.

"Well, this is my seat . . ." Charles said, his eyes boring into hers as he waited for her response.

What was he waiting for? "Okay," she said simply and nodded once. She hoped that now he would get out of the way so she could get to her own seat.

He smiled cryptically and then stuffed his luggage into the overhead compartment. That done, he stepped out of the aisle and slipped into the window seat. Once seated, he sat smiling up at her. "You're just as beautiful as ever, Elizabeth."

"You know I'm engaged to Nicholas, right?"

Charles's smile faded dramatically. Suddenly serious, he said, "You know you were engaged to *me* first, right?"

Elizabeth frowned. "*Once upon a time*. Anyway, I'd really better be going. Goodbye, Charles."

He snorted quietly. "Of course, run along, go find your seat, princess." He said with a sense of irony that puzzled her. She started down the aisle, feeling rattled. Her legs were shaking from the encounter. As she went along, she pulled out her boarding pass and checked her seat number. She was in 26B. She was so unnerved after meeting Charles that she had forgotten to check her seat number as she boarded the plane. Now as she checked the rows and numbers of the seats to either side of her, she realized that she had already passed her seat. She turned around and squeezed past the handful of people behind her. Before she even reached her seat, her stomach lurched with dread as realization dawned. She stopped at row 26 and gaped at the passenger seated in 26A.

He looked up with an enigmatic smile. "Elizabeth? What's the matter? Didn't you find your seat?"

She shook her head with disbelief. "I did."

"Then . . . ?"

She checked her boarding pass to be sure. "I'm in 26B . . ."

"That's right next to me?" Charles said with a bemused look.

"Yes, it seems to be." With a sigh, she opened the overhead compartment and stuffed her luggage in next to Charles'; then she slumped, resigned, into the seat beside him.

"Elizabeth, really, what are the odds? You have to admit this is uncanny. It's more than that. We met each other again for a reason. Perhaps . . . perhaps to show you that it's not too late—that it's never too late?"

Elizabeth frowned. "Not too late for what? Not too late to be

with you? Not too late to change my mind—*again?*”

Charles shrugged. “What does your heart tell you?”

Elizabeth sighed wearily; shook her head and looked away. She sat up in her seat and began searching down the aisle for the nearest flight attendant. Maybe she could change seats.

“Sit back and relax, Elizabeth. It's going to be a long flight.”

“That's what I'm worried about,” she muttered.

“If you get tired, you can lay your head on my shoulder.”

Incensed, she rounded on him. “Don't you get it, Charles?”

Charles looked puzzled. “Get what?”

“Please Charles, don't make this more painful than it needs to be. It's over. We're over! Surely you know that by now? There's no chance—zero—for you to be a part of my life again!”

Charles flinched at that, and his expression turned sour. “And at exactly what point did I *ask* to be a part of your life?”

“Come on, Charles. We both know what you're doing here. *It's fate!*” She mimicked his tone from their meeting, earlier. “It's not fate! Let's be honest. I don't know how exactly, but somehow my mother put you up to this, didn't she?”

He looked away. “You have a vivid imagination, Elizabeth.”

“Do I, really?”

He looked at her, “Yes,” then away again just as quickly.

“You look guilty, Charles. What are the odds of us having the same flight? Seated in the same row even?”

“Coincidences happen all the time,” Charles insisted.

“Not *this* strange. Charles, just for once, be honest with me.”

Charles met her skeptical look with a disinterested gaze and then a wan smile. “What do you want from me, Princess? You want me to admit that your mother set this up? Fine. She told me when you were leaving South Africa, that you were depressed, and that you finally were through with Nicholas and ready to leave him, and that maybe needed some support, and so I scheduled my flight back to coincide with yours. I had to pull some strings to get on the same flight and spin the check-in desk a story to get the seat next to yours.” Fate revealed.

“I don't believe you!”

“And now you won't even believe me!” Charles shook his head and threw his hands up in the air. “There's no pleasing you, princess, is there? *This* is why are not together anymore!”

“No,” Elizabeth said carefully. “I mean I don't believe how you could make the same mistake so many times in a row! You and my mother can't seem to stop manipulating me behind my back! And *that's* exactly why we're not together anymore!”

“Yeah, whatever . . .” Charles turned his gaze out the window,

all but turning his back to her.

Elizabeth turned the other way, turning her back to him as she gazed out into the aisle, continuing her search for a flight attendant. There had to be some way to change seats! Charles was right about one thing: it was going to be a *long* flight.

* * *

"A coincidence?" Denise asked. Her blonde eyebrows had fully arched and she was shaking her head. "Nicholas . . . I don't know what to say."

Nicholas sighed and his gaze slipped away to study the wood grain in the table. "It doesn't look good does it."

He felt her hand close over top of his. He looked up. Denise was staring intently at him, her jaw firmly set, her eyes soft with sympathy. "I want to tell you it's not what it looks like."

"But?" he asked, sensing the unspoken end to her sentence.

"But . . . I can't imagine how that's possible. I mean it just seems like too much of a coincidence. It seems—"

"Planned," Sandra filled in for her.

Nicholas was just shaking his head. "I just can't believe that of Elizabeth. That one moment she'd be so obviously heartbroken to be leaving me, and the next, happily embracing Charles. This must have come as a surprise to her, too." He studied the hesitant expressions on Denise's and Sandra's faces, saw the look they traded between them, and he knew they disagreed. In order to forestall further argument, he said, "I *have* to believe that. If not, then the person I fell in love with doesn't exist."

Denise grimaced. "Well . . . you have to admit that is a possibility, Nicholas. There's a big difference between loving someone for who you want them to be, and loving them for who they really are. Think about it, what's her history? I don't think she's ever spent more than a few months single. She just gets over her relationships more quickly than most people. What about her engagement to Charles—I mean she'd forgotten about you and was all but married to him when you and her, by chance, met again. Maybe she really is sad to leave you, but it sure looks like she's already found another shoulder to cry on. I'm sorry if saying this hurts you, Nicholas, but I wouldn't be your friend if I didn't tell you the truth. I think maybe . . ." Denise hesitated. "Maybe it's time for you to finally move on."

He shook his head miserably. "And if I can't?"

She smiled, squeezing his hand. "Of course you can! Believe me, I've had to do this, too. I can reassure you of this - it hurts, it really hurts ... but you do get over it. It just takes time."

Suddenly Nicholas sensed that the tables were turned, and

now he felt the immense burden—he felt Denise’s pain. Looking into her eyes, raw with emotions, a lump forming in his throat, he just barely managed to croak out the words ...

“I’m sorry, Denise. I really am. I’m so sorry I ever did anything to hurt you. You didn’t deserve it. Maybe I’ve deserved to feel this pain now, too. It’s just that . . . I wonder if there are some people that you’ll never forget? Never get over?”

Denise and Sandra both took a moment to gather their thoughts before offering a reply. “No,” Denise said.

Nicholas winced and shook his head. “I don’t know. I feel that there are, but I hope that there aren’t.”

“Oh, Nicholas, I’m sorry. I know this is really hard, but I promise you, it will get easier! Hey, look at me.” He did, and she offered a reassuring smile. “I promise it will.”

Nicholas smiled wanly back. He stood up from the table. “I think I’m going to go and lie down for a while. Clear my head.”

Denise nodded mutely, her face full of sympathy and concern. “Of course. Remember—anything you need, we’re here for you.”

Nicholas nodded and started for the door. “I will, and thanks—both of you, thanks for caring.”

The two sisters rose and gave him a hug. As Denise did so, she said, “Hey, we’ve all been friends a long time.”

Nicholas nodded. “Yes, we have, haven’t we? Since . . . well, forever really.” He smiled weakly at them.

As the door closed behind him, Nicholas shuffled reluctantly down the hall. He had to force himself to put one foot in front of the other rather than simply collapse in the hallway in a tangled heap. He’d thought going to speak to Denise and Sandra would make him feel better, but it had only made him feel worse. Before going to visit with them he’d had that small glimmer of hope. He’d been able to give Elizabeth just a little benefit of the doubt, but now he felt his spirits sinking to new depths. They were right. How could it be a coincidence? This wasn’t how things were meant to end. Well, what did it matter? by now that SAA 747, flight SA866, was somewhere off the coast of the Congo, on it’s way to London, and Elizabeth and Charles were being served dinner, sitting back comfortably in their assigned seats, sipping champagne, flying off together again, on the same plane, into the night, and out of his life.

He opened the door to his room only to be assaulted by a subtle wave of perfume. It had tormented him in the car on the way back from the airport, and here, now, in his apartment it pursued him still. How could her scent still linger on the air? Her soft, floral perfume and shampoo that always smelled like ripe

peaches. The smells brought everything back in a dazzling parade of haunting memories. He imagined her face before him, smiling adoringly, her eyes full of wonder and love. He'd never before or since found a sight more beautiful than that.

But it had all been some horrible trick. And even if it wasn't, who was he kidding? Spending 18 months apart, right now, when she'd just finished blaming him for separating her from her family . . . that would be the end of them. Even if she didn't get back together with Charles, she'd meet someone new and maybe, so would he? The temptation to pursue those more immediate options, to appease rejection, anger, betrayal, would be too strong for both of them. One, or maybe both of them would sooner or later fall victim to that. Nicholas went over to his bed and collapsed on top of the rumpled sheets. He buried his face in the pillow. He was tired, exhausted, and he quickly fell into a fuzzy, dream-filled sleep. Somewhere in his dreams things were set right. There, in the land of happily-ever-after, back in their secret place, at their waterfall in the moonlight, he made himself believe that the dream was real and reality the dream. He held Elizabeth in his arms once more and the haunting scent of her became more than just a memory; it was substance. He told himself he believed in happily-ever-after. He insisted that such a thing really could exist. Just, it seemed, not quite yet ... and not for them.



*Lizzie & Nicholas depicted here in happier times, together near their “**Secret Place**” – their waterfall (a short walk) pool, rocks and beach, deep within the Wilderness Mountains.*

See the YOUTUBE video very kindly recently made by an avid birder and nature lover:

<http://youtu.be/y9zyhSSRsgQ>

Chapter 37

In his dream the phone was ringing. Nicholas's sleep-clouded brain told him it wasn't important. Everything important to him in the world had just left for Canada—with Charles. What possible reason could he have to get up and answer the phone?

But the telephone was persistent. Soon it roused him fully from sleep and he was left blinking up at the ceiling. With a groan he sat up and paced dizzily to the phone. He picked up the receiver and placed it to his ear. "Hello?"

"Nicholas!"

He couldn't believe his ears. "Elizabeth? What—" He broke off suddenly. Had he somehow slept for three days straight? No, it couldn't be. "How are you calling me? Where are you?"

Lizzie excitedly explained: "After we taxied out onto the runway, the captain suddenly announced that there was a problem with one of the engines. They're flying technicians from Johannesburg to fix the problem. Our flight is going to be delayed by five hours or so. I'm back in the airport departure lounge, waiting for them to fix it, so we can board again."

Nicholas shuddered. "Oh, I see. . . . But what about Charles?" He couldn't help the steel that crept into his voice as he asked.

"Nicholas, I don't know what you think you saw, but . . . it's definitely not what you should think."

"Oh? Really? Well, what is it, then?"

"I had no idea Charles would be on this flight! Apparently my mother told him when I would be leaving, that I'm leaving you, and on which flight. He arranged to get the same one as me."

"Hmmm," Nicholas said. He rubbed his eyes fiercely, trying desperately to catch up—to wake up! "And?"

"Nicholas! I love *you*, not Charles. He'll never ever have a chance with me again. No one will. I'm yours and only yours. Please believe me. I had absolutely nothing to do with this!"

Nicholas let out a long sigh. "Well, that does make a lot more sense, I suppose."

"Don't suppose - Believe me! I'm really furious with both of them! I can't believe my mother would stoop so low and do such

things—*again*—even after I've let her have her way!"

"Well, you haven't let her have everything she wants, Lizzie. You're still planning to marry me, not Charles, aren't you?"

"Yes, Nicholas, I am, and she's just jolly well going to have to accept that and learn to live with it!"

Nicholas smiled. "Now there's the Lizzie I know."

"I'm starting to feel like my old self again. These past months I felt so beaten down, so helpless, but I'm starting to feel better, hopeful. We're going to make it Nicholas. I just know we will!"

Nicholas nodded. "Yes, we will, Lizzie. You know something?"

"What?"

"The only fight we've ever had, in seven years of knowing each other, was because of your mother, not because of anything really wrong between us. It's all because of her pressure!"

"I know, and I'm really sorry about that."

"It's not your fault, Elizabeth. I just meant that we can and should take some comfort in that. We're good together, Lizzie. Better than good. We're great, and we always have been."

"I agree. And . . ."

"What is it?"

"I don't think it's just coincidence that my flight was delayed."

"What do you mean?"

"I was praying this morning that God would make a way for us, that he would help us. I think he's answering my prayer."

Nicholas hesitated. "Elizabeth—"

"I know, I know, you're going to say God doesn't have time to answer our prayers, but I think you're wrong, Nicholas. I think he does. He knew my mom's plans! I know he's helping us right now."

"But Lizzie, why would God inconvenience a whole plane-load of people to answer your prayer—as nice as that prayer was?"

"I don't know, but I feel like that's exactly what's happened."

"Well, I hope you're right ..." But Lizzie interrupted him.

"What are the odds, Nicholas? That my flight would be delayed, that I'd have the opportunity to call you from the airport, before I left, not days later, to reassure you that what you saw was not at all what you thought—but only what my mom & Charles wanted?"

"Well, I'm very glad that you could do that. I have to admit I was worried, very worried, until just now when you called me. And, hey, remember—if you really can't handle your mother, if for some reason she's making your life miserable in Canada and you can't stand it; don't forget you have the APEX return ticket for 45 days. You can always come back to me. I'd like that... very much!"

"I'll remember that, Nicholas." With that, Elizabeth sighed. "I already miss you."

"I know," Nicholas replied. "I miss you, too, but ... it's for the best, else we'd just return to having to cope with all her pressure"

"I suppose, but I wish it wasn't necessary. We'll sort this out."

"And we'll see each other soon. Christmas time. I'll find a way!"

"You promise?"

Nicholas hesitated for just a moment, but then he nodded. "I promise! I have to! A Christmas-eve wish is at stake, remember?"

"Good!" Lizzie said. "I've not forgotten my wish either. I want you to know that I took your deal seriously – the deadline of the 28th July 1979, was a genuine offer..." Nicholas interrupted her.

"It was - I mean, I would have really liked that! But that's just 10 months away. That wish will likely now not come true, Lizzie."

"Nicholas, just have faith in me. I know I've not been myself lately, but I promise you - that wish will come true! I'm not sure how yet, but it will! *Just believe that when we wished upon a star, it makes no difference where we are, everything our hearts desire, will come to us!*" She said – but this time, she was not laughing.

"Ok, I will believe in you, I have to! The alternative is too sad."

Then he added "Don't forget to call me as soon as you arrive."

"I won't forget, Nicholas. I love you! Please believe in me."

"I love you too, Lizzie. Take good care of yourself. Try to stay away from any other prince Charmings, ok? Especially Charles!"

Elizabeth laughed. "You know I will. Actually, I'm of a mind to punch a particular, not-so-charming prince in his smug face!"

Now Nicholas's laughed. "You have my permission to do that, Lizzie, and as you do so, be sure to send him my regards."

Elizabeth laughed. "Well in a way, I have already done that."

"What do you mean?"

"I told him that he's only flying as far as London, and that I'll be going on alone from there to Canada. Apparently he was to fly with me all the way to Toronto. I've also made him promise not to phone my mother and tell her, before I arrive, how her schemes failed. I'd rather she hear that from me in person ... I can't wait!"

"Wow. How did you get Charles to agree to all of that?"

"Actually, he seemed relieved. My mother can be vicious with her contempt if she feels someone's let her down -as he now has."

"I'll bet. I'd really love to be a fly on the wall watching and listening when you walk out of customs, alone, toward your unsuspecting mother. Please let me know how that all unfolds."

"I will. She has to know that I'll make my own choices as to

whom I'll love, who I'll marry, and who I'll spend the rest of my life with. Nicholas, lest you forget, the one I chose to love, to marry, and to spend the rest of my life with, is you! Nobody else ... Just you! I'll find a way. That wish will come true - so too, will yours!"

A smile crept onto Nicholas's face. He could hear Elizabeth's righteous indignation. She was feeling confident, back in control of her life, ready to fight for her freedom. He smiled, reassured that this was the right choice. The tide of the battle foisted on them by Constance, had turned. She was again their love's sworn enemy, keeping them apart, not him. Lizzie saw that clearly now!

Lizzie interrupted his thoughts: "I think I'm about to run out of time on this payphone. . . ."

"Okay, Lizzie, well, we'll talk again—soon, I hope."

"Yes, we will. . . . I don't want to hang up the phone."

"Don't, then. Let's just keep talking until it cuts us off."

"I'm really sorry you had to see what you did from that balcony, Nicholas. I love you so much! Please remember that."

"Thank you for calling me, Lizzie. I'm not sure how I would have dealt with the next three days if you hadn't made this call. I love you, Elizabeth. I always have, and I always will."

"I love hearing that, Nicholas." Her smiling was clear from the tone of her voice.

"Do you remember when I first told you that Lizzie?"

"Yes, I was sitting at Wellington's train station, reading the poem and the letter that you wrote for me. I wish I'd been able to catch up to you at the next train station to at least tell you that I felt the same way about you. But for Charles and my mother's interfering I might have?" adding "So much would have changed!"

Nicholas sighed. "Back then it was me who was off to fight in a war, Lizzie, but now it's you who's going back to war, a different sort of war, but it's a war nonetheless! Suddenly I have serious misgivings about letting you go to Canada, alone, without me..."

"Don't worry, Nicholas. I'm beginning to understand that I'm not alone, that we're not alone and we've never been alone!" adding "God's helped us all along, Nicholas. Somehow ... He has!"

"It's wonderful to hear you so positive again. I hope you're right. Let's both pray that you are ... I'll join you in that prayer."

"Yes, let's both remember to do that, and Nicholas . . ."

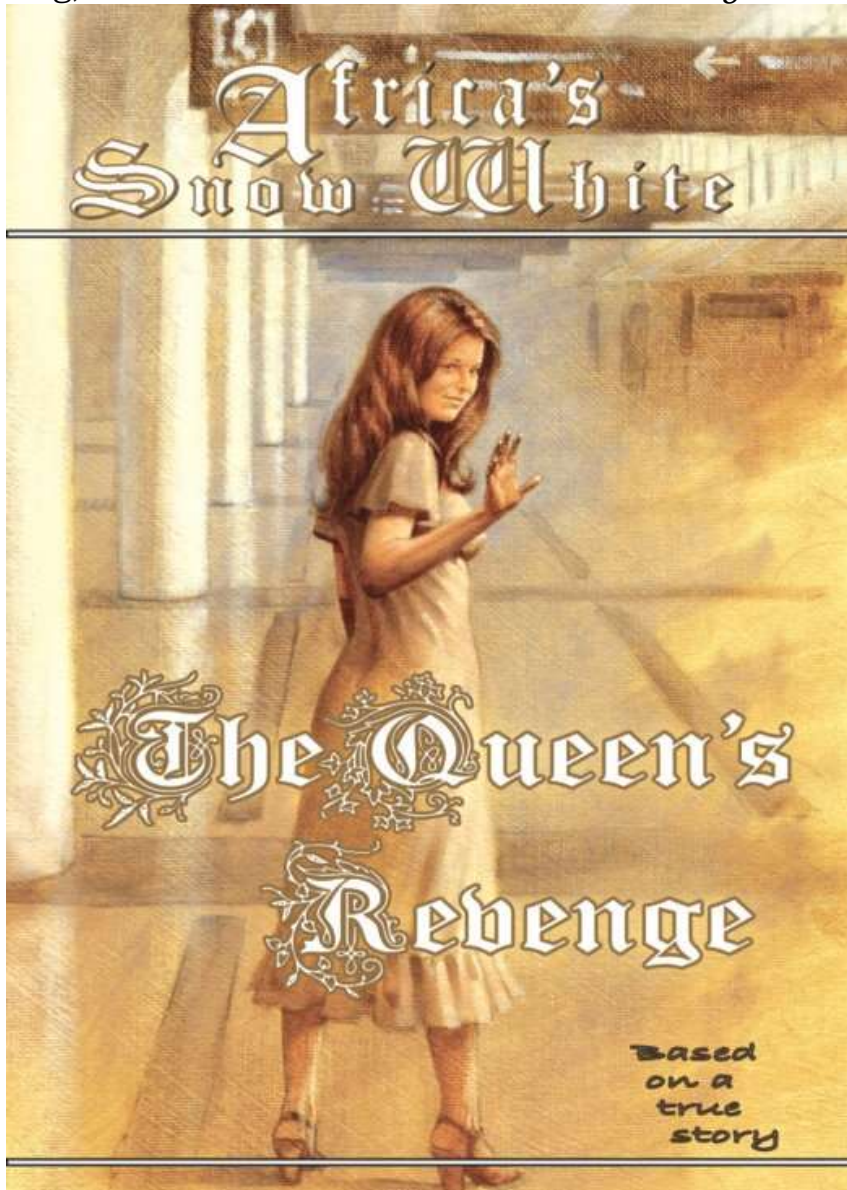
"Yes, Lizzie?"

"I'm going to miss you so much!"

He smiled. "How much, Lizzie?" He waited for her to reply, but she was silent. The dial tone had cut in, and Nicholas's smile

faded. They'd finally run out of precious time. He set the phone down slowly and stood staring at it for a long while before he turned away. Nicholas went to the balcony windows, to gaze out into the night - toward the airport where Lizzie had just put down the payphone's receiver. She was still there... tantalizingly close, yet out of his reach. Worse ... soon at the other end of the world!

Nicholas sighed. Life seemed like a long series of goodbyes... but, then he smiled. This was not goodbye, he reminded himself, and he knew, somehow, he'd be right! Some people we never let go of, never truly say goodbye to, people we'll never, ever forget! Some people are destined to stay with us and to be a part of us, forever! Thinking, Nicholas smiled - "I wouldn't have it any other way!"



Authors' footnotes: As can be seen from the highlighted stamps in Elizabeth's passport (below), she did indeed fly out of Africa, and Nicholas's life, on flight SA866: Cape Town to London, on Friday, Oct. 6th, 1978. Charles was on that flight, sitting next to her. Most unusually, that reliable Boeing 747SP was delayed, for several hours, due to mechanical difficulties. That's easy enough to verify. Maintenance logs for that Jumbo-jet do still exist at SAA or Boeing. As a result, before leaving South Africa, Elizabeth managed to call Nicholas from a payphone in the airport's departure lounge, explaining that what he'd seen from the balcony of Cape Town's international airport, was not what his worst fears had him imagining! As the plot unfolds in the final two books book in this series, it becomes abundantly clear that "There are some things people cannot do, but God can do anything" (Luke 18:27) – If we bother to ask, and to believe! Clearly Constance had other plans for Elizabeth's life and soon she'd have distance, home-field advantage and time on her side! But Nicholas and Elizabeth had always dared to dream loving dreams, to make wishes – even to pray and ask - often plead, with God for help! Just perhaps Constance underestimated her daughter's tenacity? It is said that "Love will always find a way" ... well, let's read on and see if their love does end up finding the way - or not?



THE STORY CONTINUES

Don't expect to get any relief just yet. There's no respite from a real-life roller-coaster ride that is so typical of true-love under siege. In real-life, evil doesn't just give up then slink away, never to be seen again – it lurks in the shadows, licking it's wounds, waiting for the right time to get revenge – it did! Worse, it felt it had regained the upper-hand. So any relief will be temporary. Evil's victims need to learn to capitalize on victories, then press on fast to drive home the advantage rather than to celebrate too soon; else a black knight may just ride off into the sunset with the Princess, as now he did, whilst the white knight stands by, looking on from a distance, powerless to stop him! But there's always still the King ... and so there will be a wedding in the sequels - but the question is, will it be in London, or Cape Town? Nicholas and Lizzie's cruelest defeat yet now looms large -and they didn't even see it coming!

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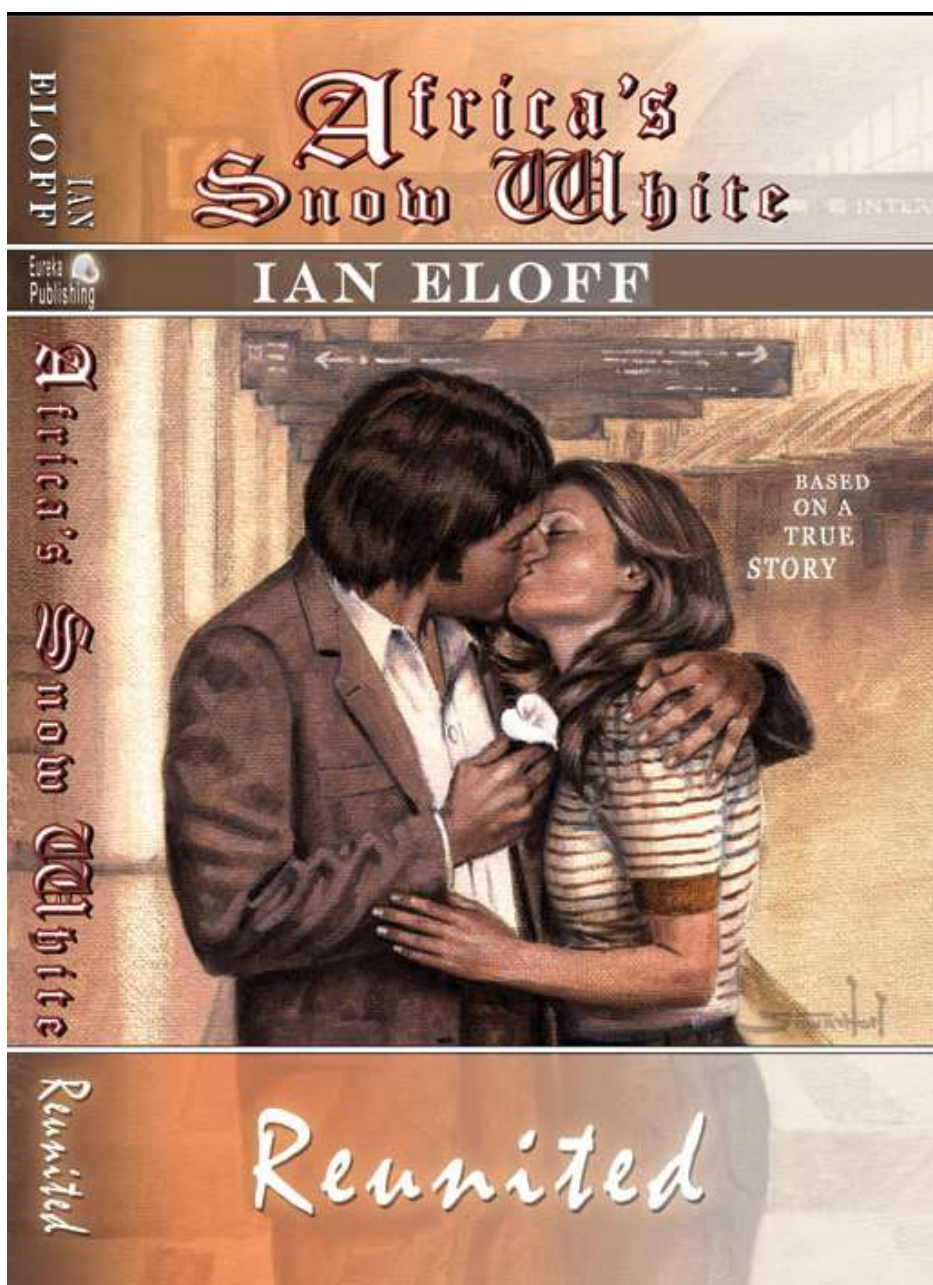
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Africa's Snow White ... eunited ... (Vol-7)

By: IAN ELOFF (With input from real-life “Elizabeth Strauss”)

“Jonathan (and Ian) won some major concessions for the 2nd editions—the right to include some of the more private details of the real-life love story. In this novel we encounter healthy 21/22 year old suitors who're already engaged. Understanding his relationship to characters within his novels, made this a rather tricky decision! But truth is important for this story and, as happened in real life, truth is much stranger (and more entertaining) than fiction! Thus some characters reluctantly agreed to shed the comfortably safe veneers of “youthful innocence” they've enjoyed so far in his novels. The emotional and adult level of the next novels is about to be kicked up a few notches as this becomes a young-adult love-story. Probably just as well Lizzie's son got to be a famous Sci-Fi author and had to concentrate on that part of his writing career! We're about to see Constance's redouble her efforts to regain control of Elizabeth's mind—with very sad consequences for both Nicholas and Lizzie. Yet, as the next book's title suggests, we can look forward to a reunion, of sorts, at some point. However, Nicholas and Lizzie are about to suffer their worst defeat, ever, at the hands of a determined queen - a plot so unspeakably cruel, that I wince just thinking about it again. But maybe her control over Lizzie is not as iron-clad as she thinks? Maybe Lizzie's simple faith in a Force far stronger than her mother, is well founded, and can set her free? We'll soon witness the 1st of Lizzie's 3 weddings, on 3 continents. Question is, is that the wedding we've all been waiting for? What about a “London” stamp in her passport in December 1979? Charles lives there! Is it the wedding Constance wants – or the wedding Lizzie and Nicholas want? Well, let's just read on, shall we?” —**Safely Anonymous**

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